

AMBITION

MARCH/APRIL 2025

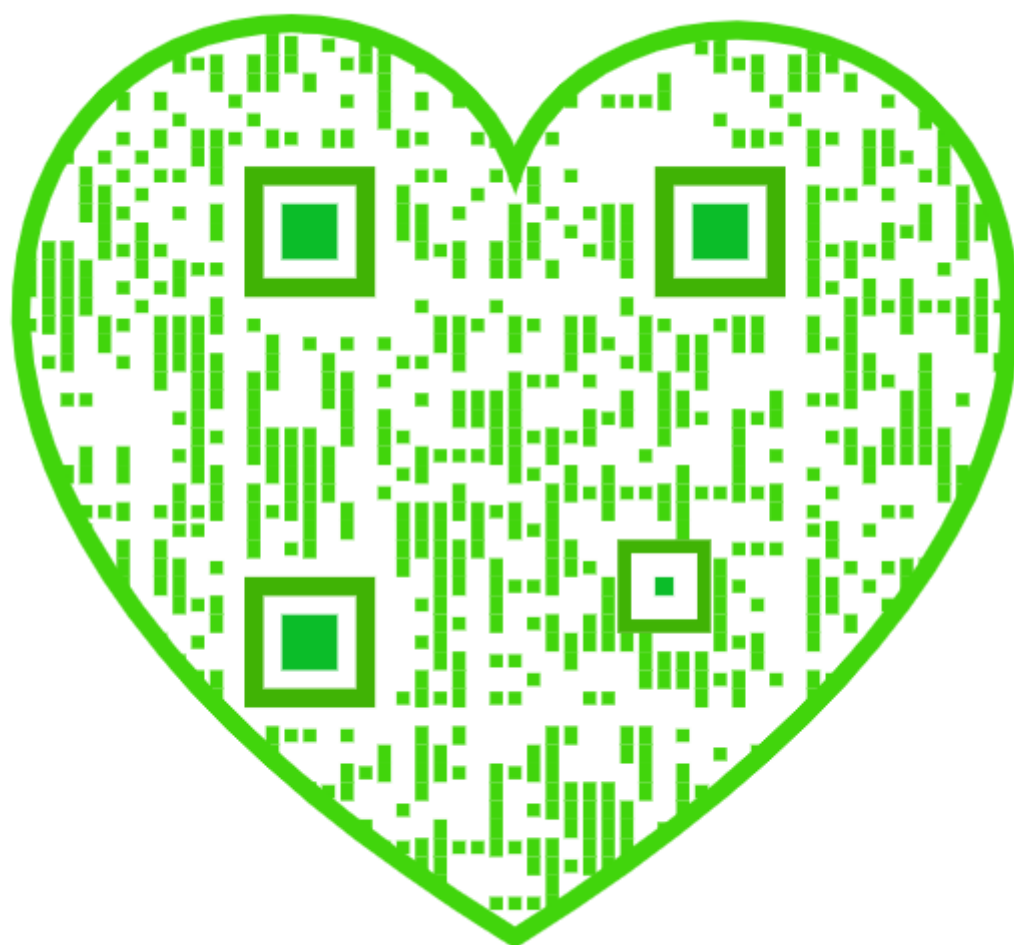
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SHIFTING THE DIAL

An exclusive interview with new Economy Minister
Dr Caoimhe Archibald.







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A woman with dark hair, smiling, wearing a grey coat over a teal top. She is standing in front of an orange airplane with white windows. The background is slightly blurred.

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AIB's head of Corporate NI and head of Business Banking NI have been working closely together to help local businesses grow for the future.

Managing Editor: Olivia Stewart **Interviews:** Emma Deighan **Publisher:** Chris Sherry **Advertising Managers:** Lorraine Gill & Julie Patterson **Editorial Assistant:** Joanne Harkness **Email addresses:** olivia.stewart@northernirelandchamber.com / l.gill@ulstertatler.com / j.patterson@ulstertatler.com **Websites:** www.northernirelandchamber.com / www.ulstertatler.com **Publisher:** Ulster Tatler Group, 39 Boucher Road, Belfast, BT12 6UT Tel: 028 9066 3311 **Printed by:** W&G Baird, Antrim.
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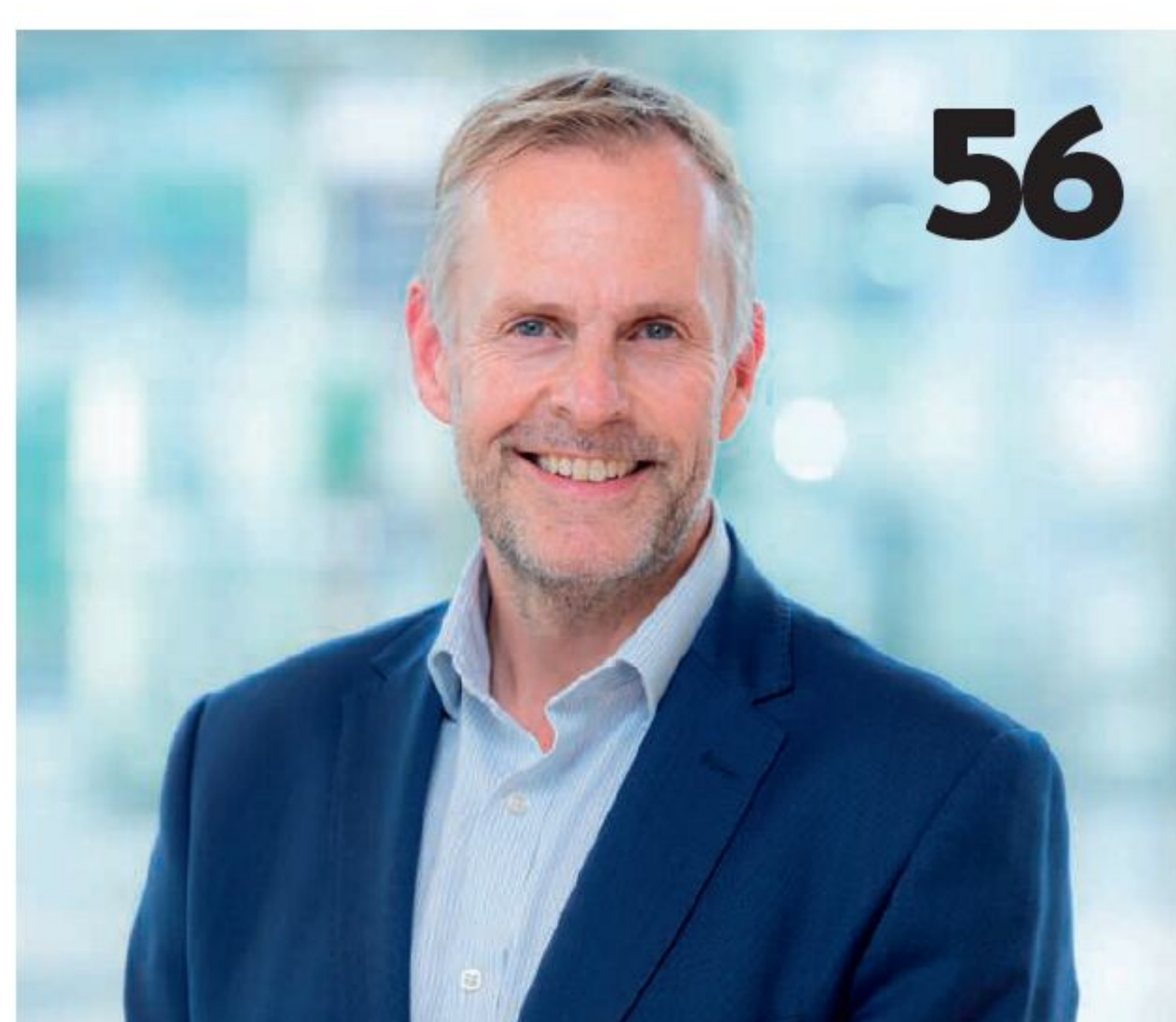
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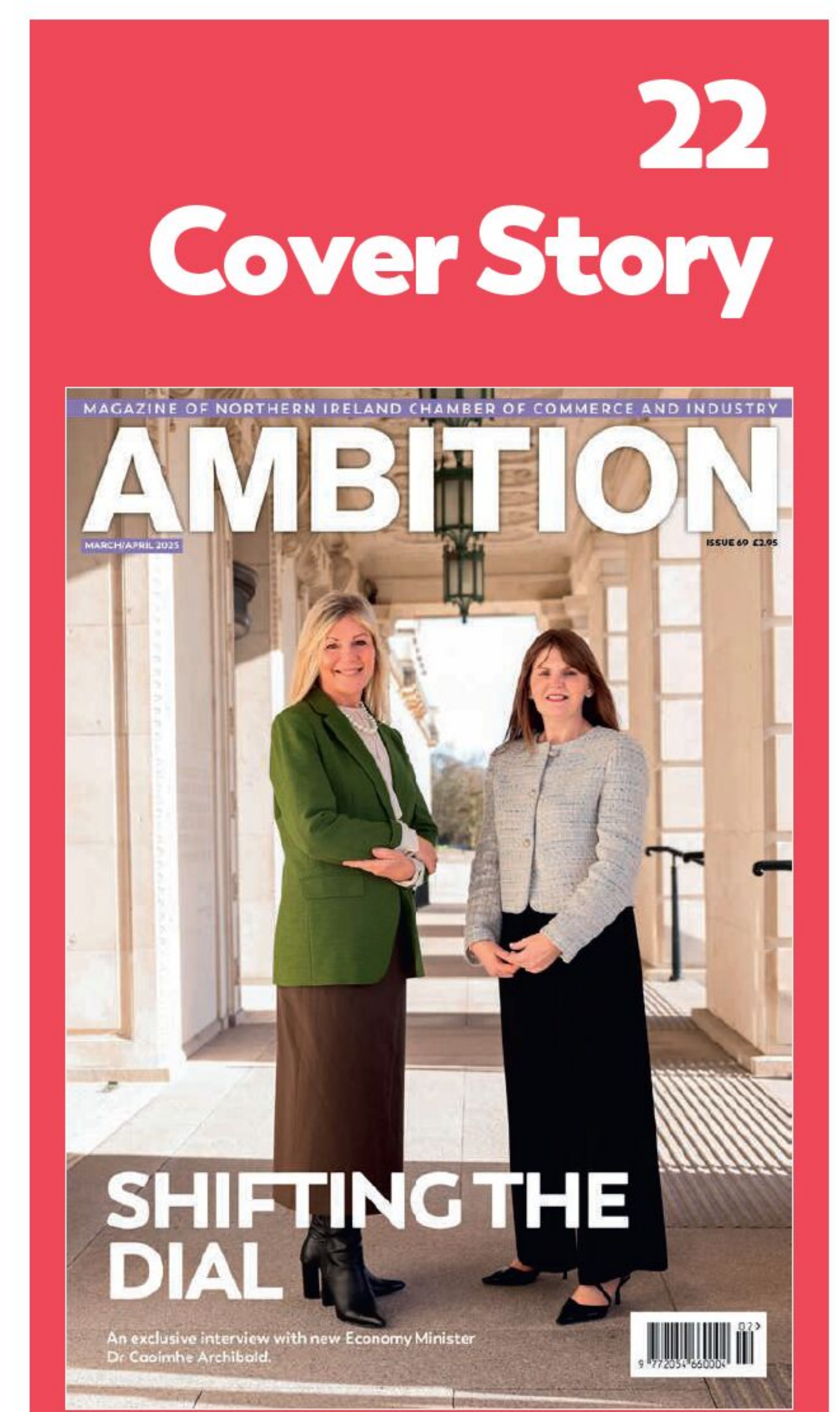
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Time for co-ordinated action on skills

At NI Chamber, we were pleased to support the recent launch of the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer, a report published by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre. Its findings should make employers and government double down on their plans to deal with the demand levels ahead.

NI Chamber members have been concerned about maintaining sustainable access to a large pool of highly skilled people for a considerable time. Our own research confirms that recruitment difficulties, which have grown significantly for more than a decade now, remain persistently high. In Q4 24, 76% of manufacturers and 77% of services firms reported difficulties in recruiting.

Our members would like to see a much more demand-led approach to people and skills, with particular focus on areas like AI, automation and digital skills. Late last year, we outlined our own proposals for the establishment of a new, independent Workforce Development Agency for Northern Ireland.

Record low unemployment, an ageing population and a growing proportion of the economically inactive due to long-term sickness will intensify pressures on labour supply in the future. Restrictions on cross-border working and migration policy constraints further compound the problem.

The Skills Barometer emphasises that improving cross-border

mobility is vital, with 25,000 people already engaged in cross-border economic activity. We believe that an All-Island Mobility Task Force would go some way to facilitating the smooth movement of skilled workers.

Northern Ireland remains the only region in the UK and Ireland without a dedicated childcare strategy, hindering workforce participation with a disproportionate impact on female employment. This undermines our competitiveness and acts as a barrier to the workplace for many, where childcare costs outweigh potential earnings.

Employers, including many of our members, have displayed a willingness to play a role in supporting employees with childcare challenges by offering incentives and flexibility. Whilst it is not the role of the employer to act as a substitute for an Executive strategy, with the right support from a Westminster government, for some employers, the Workplace Nursery Model is an attractive proposition.

Addressing the people and skills challenge is central to unlocking opportunities for sustainable economic growth across Northern Ireland. Resolving them requires coordinated action between policymakers, businesses, and society.

Caitroina McCusker, President, Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry



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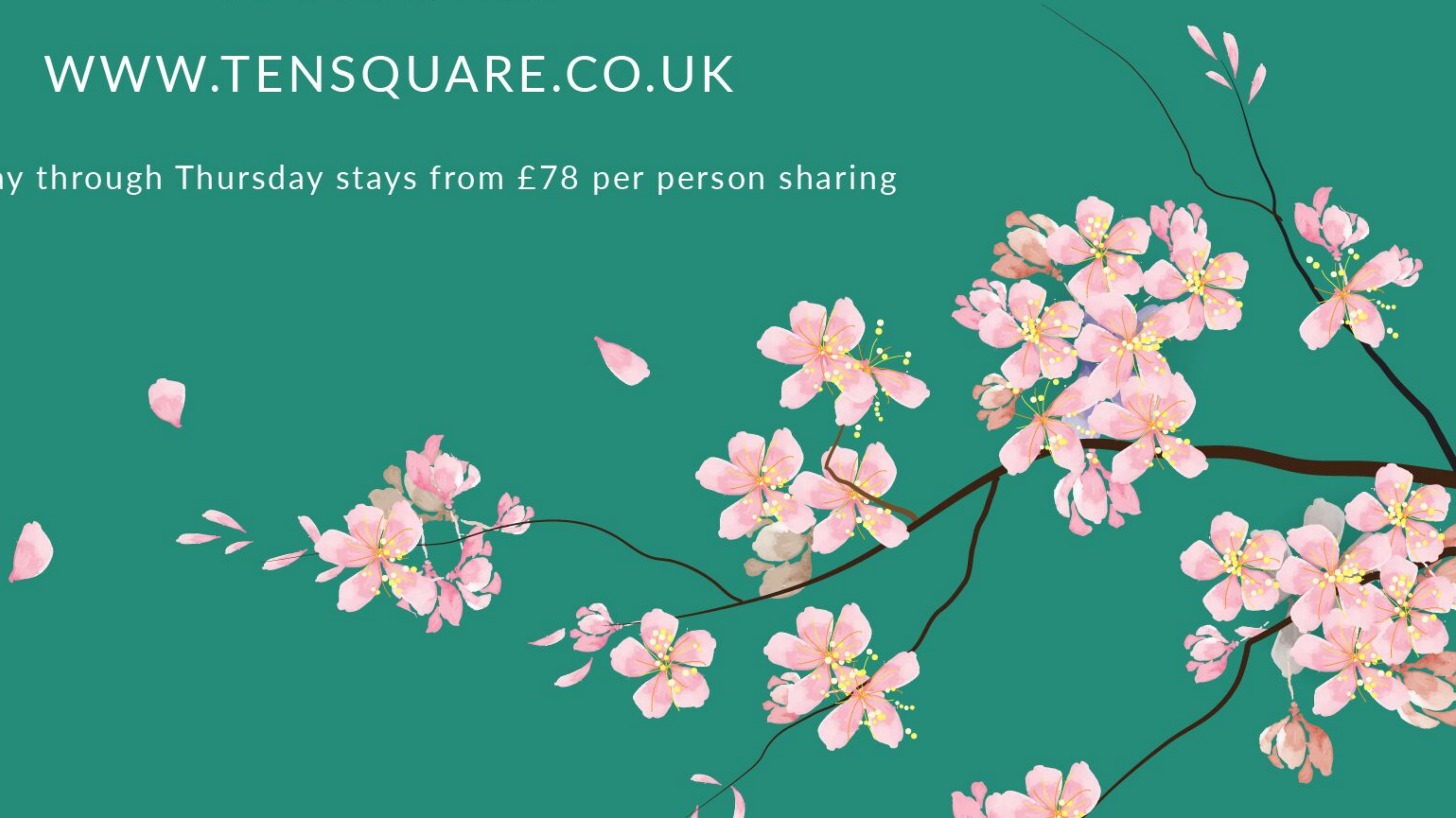
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Upstream Secures £150m Funding For Local Businesses After Successful MBO

Upstream has successfully completed a management buyout (MBO) of the business, bringing it back into full local ownership.

The MBO team, led by original Upstream founder, Judith Totten MBE, has secured an agreement to buy the business back from the US securitisation fund, which acquired Upstream in June 2021.

Founded in June 2011 as a boutique SME funding provider, Upstream has evolved into a specialist leading structured ABL lender, challenging the mainstream market with a comprehensive and tailored offering for SME and mid-corporate business owners.

The business has successfully scaled tenfold post-Covid, and this new step assures that this rapid growth trajectory, and evolution, will continue with a focus on acquisition and product diversification across the UK and Ireland.

Pollen Street Capital has provided a new £150 million facility to accelerate the ambitious and sustainable expansion of the business.

Upstream Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Judith Totten, said:

“This significant new partnership with Pollen Street Capital will give us the bandwidth and fire power to support more ambitious entrepreneurs, with a much broader service offering.

This MBO brings the Upstream business back under the full control of the local team, positioning us for growth through acquisition and diversification into new markets and services across the working capital, structured ABL and receivables spectrum. We remain sector agnostic but now have the capital for larger structured finance deals and a full ABL suite of facilities, securing our place as the ‘go to’ for growth funding.



Lewis McCallan, ABL Partner, Judith Totten, Founder and CEO Upstream, and Bill Hichens, Operations Director.

CGI Completes Acquisition of UK-Based BJSS

CGI has completed its previously announced acquisition of BJSS, a leading UK-based technology and engineering consultancy, which also has a European office in Dublin. The acquisition aligns with CGI’s strategy to expand its consulting-led services and drive innovation in cloud, AI, data analytics, and software engineering for commercial and public sector clients.

“We are really pleased to welcome all of the new joiners from BJSS, whose deep expertise in digital engineering enhances CGI’s collective ability to deliver industry-leading technology solutions and advisory services to clients across the UK and Ireland,” said Tara McGeehan, President, CGI UK & Australia.

The integration of BJSS into CGI’s UK operations will enable expanded service offerings and deeper collaboration with clients, particularly in the retail, financial services, healthcare, energy, and public sectors. The addition of the BJSS Dublin office will also see an expansion of CGI’s offering in the Irish market.

Bluegrass Horse Feed Expands Sponsorship at Down Royal

Bluegrass Horse Feed has unveiled its new ‘Best Turned Out League’ at Down Royal Racecourse, a pioneering initiative set to celebrate the unsung heroes of the horse racing world – the dedicated stable staff and grooms who ensure racehorses look and perform at their best.

This initiative marks a major expansion of Bluegrass’s sponsorship with Down Royal, underscoring its commitment to both equine excellence and the behind-the-scenes professionals who support it.

As part of its enhanced partnership, Bluegrass Horse Feed will also continue its support of the St Patrick’s Day race fixture on Monday, 17th March 2025, one of the most highly anticipated events on the Irish racing calendar.

Adam Short, Sales, Marketing & Equine Nutritional Advisor at Bluegrass Horse Feed, and Chloe Ferris, Commercial Director at Down Royal Racecourse.



John Healy OBE appointed as Chair of the Board at FinTrU

Darragh McCarthy, FinTrU Founder & CEO, said: “John’s expertise will be invaluable as FinTrU continues to be at the forefront of creating innovative, technology-enabled Client Lifecycle Management solutions. Our people are FinTrU’s greatest asset and have been central to our achievements as an organisation. John’s appointment will support us in working together to further build upon this success.”

John Healy OBE, Chair of the Board for FinTrU Limited, added: “Ambition and growth continue to be core elements at FinTrU, and I am delighted to join the company. I am greatly looking forward to working alongside the passionate FinTrU team as we target future accomplishments.”



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Tourism NI CEO To Step Down

John McGrillen, who joined Tourism NI as CEO in July 2015, has announced that he will formally leave the role at the end of July following The 153rd Open at Royal Portrush.

Mr McGrillen's exit from the organisation marks the end of a 30-year-career in the public sector in a number of high-profile leadership roles.

During his tenure as CEO of Tourism NI, Mr McGrillen oversaw the return of The Open to Northern Ireland in 2019, the first time in more than 60 years. He also played a pivotal role in the recovery of the local tourism industry from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Tourism NI's work in supporting the sector through this period helped increase staycations and visitor numbers from the Republic of Ireland, resulting in the value of the industry to the Northern Ireland economy reaching £2.3bn in 2023/2024.

John McGrillen, CEO of Tourism NI, said: "This summer I will have been CEO of Tourism NI for more than a decade. It has been a privilege to have been both a Board member and CEO.

"It is a truly wonderful organisation driven by exceptional, hardworking people who are determined to make a positive impact on this place we all call home.

"Throughout my career in the public sector, I have had the good fortune to work with many great teams and many brilliant people across the tourism industry.

"The recently launched 10 Year Vision and Action Plan for Tourism by Minister Murphy is a fantastic springboard which will steer tourism through the next decade, however I think this summer is the right time for me to step aside and let a new CEO lead Tourism NI into that new era."

Ellvena Graham, Chair of Tourism NI, said: "I would like to pay tribute to John and thank him for the exceptional leadership he has shown in driving the growth of Northern Ireland's tourism sector over the past decade. The sector has transformed under his leadership."



John McGrillen, CEO of Tourism NI pictured with Ellvena Graham, Board Chair of Tourism NI.

CIGA Healthcare Secures £1.4m Contracts in the US and Europe

Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald has announced that CIGA Healthcare has landed two lucrative contracts with Walmart Marketplace and Austria DM valued at £1.4 million.

Founded in 2005, CIGA Healthcare has become a global leader in over the counter and professional diagnostic tests, delivering its innovative Suresign brand to pharmacies and healthcare providers worldwide.

Making the announcement while visiting the company in Ballymena, Minister Archibald said:

"The success of CIGA Healthcare in securing these contracts highlights the international opportunities available to companies in the north. This achievement demonstrates how our Life and Health Sciences sector can compete and win on the global stage.

"It was inspiring today to hear about the company's collaboration with Ulster University to develop innovative diagnostic tests for heart failure and dementia. These advancements will no doubt help to further strengthen its global reputation and position the company as a leader in improving patient care globally."

CIGA Healthcare secured its contract with Walmart Marketplace after pitching its products to senior executives of the retail giant, at an event hosted by Invest NI in partnership with the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) earlier this year.

Founder and CEO of CIGA Healthcare, Irwin Armstrong added:

"The global diagnostic market is growing rapidly, creating exciting opportunities for companies like ours. Our new contract wins with Walmart Marketplace and Austria DM showcases the value of our commitment to quality, accuracy and supply chain excellence.

"As a brand, we are already well established in the UK, Ireland, Europe and North and South America, the Middle East and Africa. We envisage that today's announcement will further build our

global reputation and help us break into new markets such as the Far East and Asia to supply our products to leading pharmacies. We are particularly grateful for the support from Invest NI, which has been instrumental in helping us achieve these milestones."

Irwin Armstrong, Owner and CEO, CIGA Healthcare, Economy Minister Caoimhe Archibald and Anne Beggs, Executive Director of International Business and Skills, Invest NI.



Eakin Healthcare Commits to Science Based Targets Initiative

Eakin Healthcare has announced its commitment to the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), reinforcing its dedication to environmental sustainability and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This commitment marks a significant step in the company's broader sustainability strategy, aligning its business operations with the global effort to limit climate change to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

By joining SBTi, Eakin Healthcare pledges to set science-based emissions reduction targets in line with the Paris Agreement and its own commitment to being net-zero by 2045, with an interim target for their scope 1 and 2 emissions to be carbon neutral by 2030. This initiative underscores the company's proactive approach to corporate responsibility, ensuring that its sustainability efforts are measurable, credible, and impactful.

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Touch Down for Shoppers & Sustainability

Lidl Northern Ireland has opened the doors to its largest store in the region, following the completion of a £9m project to relocate to a larger site within Riverside Retail Park in Coleraine where it has served the local community since 2005.

Spanning an impressive 2,514 square metres, the expanded store has created 8 new jobs for the local community, bringing the total team employed at Lidl's Coleraine store to 30. Comprising the largest solar power network of any Lidl store in Ireland, the new Coleraine store has achieved an EPC A+ Energy Rating, which is the highest possible rating for energy efficiency, certifying it as the most energy efficient Lidl supermarket in Northern Ireland. The store is also Lidl's most energy efficient

store in its network of 225 stores across the island of Ireland.

Built with sustainability at its core, including two electrical charging points for customers, the building substantiates Lidl's commitment to reducing energy consumption and lowering carbon footprint across its business and underscores its commitment to developing sustainably.

Commenting on the retailer's first store opening of 2025, Ivan Ryan, Regional Managing Director for Lidl Northern Ireland, said:

"We are delighted to officially open the doors to our largest store in Northern Ireland today. This investment reflects our ongoing commitment to



Tomas Fusek, Lidl Coleraine Store Manager; Mayor of Causeway Coast and Glens, Cllr Ciarán McQuillan; Andrew Trimble; Ivan Ryan, Regional Managing Director, Lidl Northern Ireland.

enhancing and upgrading our store network and providing the best possible shopping experience for our customers."

New Public Transport Charter Launched in Northwest



Translink has announced the launch of a new public transport charter for Derry~Londonderry entitled 'Better on Board', marking an important step forward in the journey towards a cleaner, greener and better connected region.

The initiative, which brings together local leaders, businesses and organisations, encourages greater public transport use as part of a collective effort to reduce emissions, ease congestion and enhance air quality in the city – which has become a leading example for sustainable travel in Northern Ireland.

Since launching in September 2023, Translink's zero emission Foyle Metro service has facilitated over 3 million passenger journeys, covering more than 1.3 million emissions-free miles – the equivalent of over 50 trips around the world. The service has also saved over 2,000 tonnes of CO2, reducing pollution and supporting a healthier region.

Backed by stakeholders representing various sectors and industries, the Better on Board Charter is an important collaborative response to drive forward modal shift to public transport.

Initial partners who have signed up to support the Better on Board Charter in the Northwest include: Alchemy, All State, City Centre Initiative, City Hotel Derry, Consumer Council NI, Derry Chamber of Commerce, FinTrU, NI Chamber, North West Regional College, Sustrans, Ulster University, Visit Derry, and Western Health & Social Care Trust. By supporting the Charter, these organisations have acknowledged the importance of commuters choosing public transport for the social, economic and environmental well-being of Derry~Londonderry and the wider Northwest.

International Visitors at SERC

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) recently hosted visitors from the Chinese Consul in Northern Ireland and representatives from Zhongyuan University of Technology in China.

Consul General Li Nan was welcomed to SERC's Bangor Campus by Heather McKee, Deputy Principal Planning, Performance and Engagement, before touring the College's specialist teaching facilities and the opportunity to meet with students and staff. Consul General Li commended SERC for its active engagement with China, highlighting that educational exchanges and cooperation are an important component of China-UK/Northern Irish relations. He reaffirmed China's support for vocational education institutions in both regions to establish sustainable partnerships, jointly develop curricula, and collaborate on vocational education and skills training.

MRP Unveil Plans for Food Market at Weavers Cross

An authentic street food market and community hub in the heart of Belfast is set to be the first development of the 1.5 million square foot Weavers Cross project, one of the city's largest ever regeneration developments.

MRP is the Master Developer for the transformational Weavers Cross project, which is set to create a vibrant inclusive neighbourhood combining a mix of commercial, cultural, residential, and business amenities surrounding Belfast's new integrated Grand Central Station.

MRP has worked collaboratively with partners to bring forward the first project in the Weavers Cross development scheme marking a dynamic step towards revitalising this area of the city, at the site of the former Europa Buscentre.

This new meanwhile use which will include an artisanal food market, and bar, will create up to 40 jobs and has already received considerable interest from a range of traders.

What will your legacy be?



A gift in your Will to Queen's can become many things.

For parents Richard and Julie Buchanan, it can be a way to honour the memory of their daughter Catherine by supporting the study of Physics.

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What will your legacy be?



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DISCOVER MORE

SAM Mouldings Announces £20 Million Investment



SAM Mouldings has announced a £20 million investment in its 35th year of business. This significant investment is in addition to the £7 million SAM already invested during 2023/24.

This milestone investment underscores SAM's ongoing commitment to its customers, people, sustainability, and excellence, ensuring it continues to lead the industry into the future.

£10 million of this investment will be spent on installing new state-of-the-art bespoke machinery which will allow SAM to double its current output to offer an even greater range of high-quality MDF mouldings to meet rising market demand.

"At SAM, we understand the importance of delivering the right product at the right time," said Sam McCrea MBE, CEO of SAM Mouldings. "This investment in advanced manufacturing capabilities ensures we remain at the forefront of the industry and continue to offer the high-quality product our customers expect."

Multimillion Deal For Artemis Technologies in the US

Artemis Technologies, a global leader in zero-emission maritime technology, has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), in a multimillion-dollar deal with Delta Marine to help advance clean maritime solutions in the US. Delta Marine is based in Washington State, home to the United States' largest fleet of passenger ferries. This update follows on from an earlier announcement to supply 20 of its cutting-edge hydrofoil vessels to Miami-based transport innovator, Urbanlink.

Speaking after experiencing the clean maritime company's electric vessel in action during her visit to Artemis Technologies' New York base at Brooklyn Navy Yard, Minister Archibald said: "It is fantastic to see Artemis Technologies expanding in the US and securing high-profile partnerships that will accelerate the transition to sustainable maritime transport. The north is home to world-leading innovation in clean tech, and Artemis Technologies' revolutionary hydrofoil technology represents a significant opportunity to decarbonise maritime transport."



In 2024, Artemis Technologies opened a new office in Brooklyn, further cementing its presence in the US.

Artemis Technologies Co-Founder David Tyler: "The US is a crucial market for our business, and this partnership with Delta Marine is a significant milestone in our global growth strategy. Invest NI has been a key partner in helping to facilitate our expansion by providing support to grow our exports and through their expert representation in the Belfast Maritime Consortium. We are proud to represent Northern Ireland on an international stage and look forward to further strengthening our presence in the US."

Wilsons Auctions Unveils £1 Million Renovations at Belfast Branch



Wilsons Auctions, the UK and Ireland's leading independent auction house has announced the completion of a major renovation project at its Belfast branch. Following a £1M investment, the Headquarters site at Mallusk has a significantly enhanced customer experience and modernised staff facilities.

The upgrade of the Belfast auction house emphasises its 'state-of-the-art' offering ahead of 90-year anniversary.

Peter Johnston, Group Operations Director at Wilsons Auctions, commented, "We're thrilled to unveil our newly renovated Belfast office, a space that reflects the continued growth of our business. This investment underlines our dedication to enhancing our customer service and providing a more comfortable and efficient environment for both our staff and clients. We want everyone to feel welcome here and we invite the public to come and experience the new space for themselves."



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Columnist

Jane Shaw

Health Coach & Therapist

Developing Agency

I commonly say to groups that my work is about empowering individuals to have more choice in how they react or behave in any given situation – in other words, to develop agency. When we have agency over our own behaviour, we have more control and agency over our lives. Self-agency supports us to make good decisions. And when I peel back the layers, I demonstrate to these groups that at the foundation of creating self-agency, is to develop a sense of biological safety in the body.

What does biological safety mean? Essentially it is about having a regulated nervous system that can adapt and take appropriate action. When we have agency we can mobilise when needed and we can rest when needed, as well as many in-between combinations. We can explore, take risks, and act with confidence. In biological safety states we feel joy, passion, and compassion, and we can play, connect with others, be present and be creative.

Our body is always trying to return to homeostasis and asking whether it needs to conserve energy or expend energy. This is our survival strategy at its most basic. Do I respond from a place of defence – fear or anger – or do I respond from a place of safety? Do I go towards something, someone or a situation, or withdraw?

A regulated nervous system allows us to feel calm, physically and emotionally secure, rather than hypervigilant or shut down. In biological safety there are no perceived imminent threats to our wellbeing, and we can interact with others making secure attachments and bonds.

Having agency requires the ability to choose and act freely, and it is easy to see that this is only really possible in biological safety states. One of the reasons is that in safety states, our prefrontal cortex can

more fully engage. This is the part of the brain responsible for decision-making, planning, and flexible thinking. When we are hyper-vigilant, we have limited choice in how to act, since we need to prepare to defend ourselves. When we need to defend ourselves against a perceived threat, the survival circuits of the brain, such as the amygdala and dorsal vagal complex, are activated.

Furthermore, safe environments support agency, which could be seen as collective biological safety. As a therapist and facilitator, I work to be the safest thing or person in the room to allow the others around me to orient to their own safety. It is a powerful and effective skill. In safe environments, people naturally experiment, explore and are able to assert themselves, all core components of agency. Unsafe environments tend to make us retreat and play small.

Agency grows when we feel our internal compass is reliable; we can trust ourselves. If our body feels unsafe, then we constantly scan for external threats, and in fact can imagine threats when they are not necessarily there. This is the territory of conspiracy theories, which tend not to take hold when we have self-agency and biological safety in a regulated nervous system. We can trust our own decisions in safety states.

Interestingly, safety states can also support risk taking. When we have biological safety and agency, we can set boundaries, leave a bad situation, or speak up. We are more likely to question situations. We are more willing to step into uncertainty because our body trusts that we can handle it. We might view this as also having more resilience.

On the other hand, when safety is missing, perhaps through chronic stress or trauma, it can lead to chronic hyper-vigilance, continually scanning for danger,

leading to collapse, helplessness and other shut down states such as dissociation, numbness, or passive compliance and appeasement. All of these reduce agency because the nervous system is stuck in survival mode. Here we do not want to take unnecessary risks, we play small, try to keep the status quo by perhaps following what others say or ask of us. We might even believe our actions or viewpoints don't matter through a learned helplessness. We become unable to think for ourselves, relying on others to dictate what we should do. We have no agency of our own.

My therapeutic and coaching work is therefore aimed at supporting the nervous system's biological safety states. Without a felt sense of safety, even the most empowered cognitive strategies such as goal setting or mind shifts become ineffective – because the body doesn't feel safe enough to be in charge. Better strategies to develop agency include somatic practices such as somatic awareness, breathing and movement practices, therapeutic bodywork, and auditory practices, all of which effect change in the autonomic nervous system.

In conclusion, when the body feels safe it has agency to act, think, and behave in ways that are most authentic to each of us. We are free to be ourselves.



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Columnist

Gerard Shone

Head of Security and Networking Solutions, Telefónica Tech

Building Cyber Resilience for Today's Business

Gerard has over a decade of experience in the cyber security field and his expertise lies in security assurance, risk management, and the practical application of security measures. He has a proven track record of establishing effective security roadmaps within the police sector, manufacturing, and local government, always emphasising the human impact of security initiatives.

The U.S. Army War College introduced a new concept to describe the world after the Cold War in the 1990s. It describes a reality which is Volatile / Uncertain / Complex / Ambiguous...VUCA.

In 2025, cyber resilience isn't a future aspiration; it's a present-day necessity. For Northern Ireland's SMEs, the digital landscape demands a proactive, integrated approach to safeguarding operations and building trust. We've seen firsthand how cyber threats can disrupt businesses, damage reputations, and hinder growth. It's a reality we face today, and it requires practical, actionable solutions.

At Telefónica Tech, we understand that your focus is on running your business, not navigating complex cyber security jargon. Our mission is to provide clear, effective strategies that integrate seamlessly into your daily operations. This isn't about theoretical concepts; it's about making informed choices that protect your business right now. A cornerstone of modern cyber security is designing security by default. In 2025, this isn't a luxury; it's a fundamental principle. This means building security into every aspect of your business from the ground up. Instead of adding security as an afterthought, it's about embedding it into your systems,

processes, and even your company culture. It's about recognising that security isn't just a technical issue; it's a business imperative.

But what does this look like in practice? In many ways, security is simply the conscious application of common sense. It starts with awareness – understanding the risks and fostering a conscientious mindset amongst your team. This means encouraging everyone to think critically about potential vulnerabilities and to take responsibility for protecting sensitive information. It's about creating a culture where security is everyone's responsibility, not just the IT departments.

Systems and technology are then implemented to support this mindset and act as enablers of secure processes, not replacements for conscious responsibility. For example, multi-factor authentication adds an extra layer of security to logins, while data encryption protects sensitive information from unauthorised access. But these tools are most effective when combined with a culture of awareness and responsibility.

Choosing the right technology and vendors is equally crucial. In a rapidly evolving threat landscape, you need solutions that can adapt and scale with your business. That's why selecting vendors who align with your long-term security goals is essential. Look for partners who understand your business needs and can provide solutions that support your growth trajectory. It's about making practical choices that stand the test of time, ensuring you're not constantly rebuilding your security infrastructure as you expand.

To achieve this, consider adopting a comprehensive security framework. This framework acts as a roadmap, allowing you to map your technology,

people, and process choices to your business objectives. It provides a structured approach to cyber security, enabling you to plan for future growth and ensure your security foundations remain solid. By using a framework, you can proactively identify potential vulnerabilities and implement measures to mitigate them, ensuring you're building on a secure foundation, not constantly patching holes.

For example, a local manufacturing SME recently implemented a framework-driven security strategy. They focused on "security by default" in their IoT-connected production line, chose vendors with proven track records in industrial cyber security, and structured their security policies around a recognised industry framework.

This resulted in a significant reduction in downtime and increased customer confidence, demonstrating the tangible benefits of a strategic approach. In today's interconnected world, cyber resilience is not just about protecting your own business; it's about safeguarding your entire supply chain. By adopting a proactive, framework-driven approach, you can strengthen your defences and contribute to a more secure business environment for everyone.

As we navigate the complexities of 2025, remember that cyber security is not a one-time fix; it's an ongoing process. By designing security by default, choosing the right vendors, and leveraging a comprehensive security framework, you can build a resilient business that's prepared for the challenges of today and tomorrow. At Telefónica Tech, we're here to support you on this journey, providing the expertise and solutions you need to thrive in the digital age.

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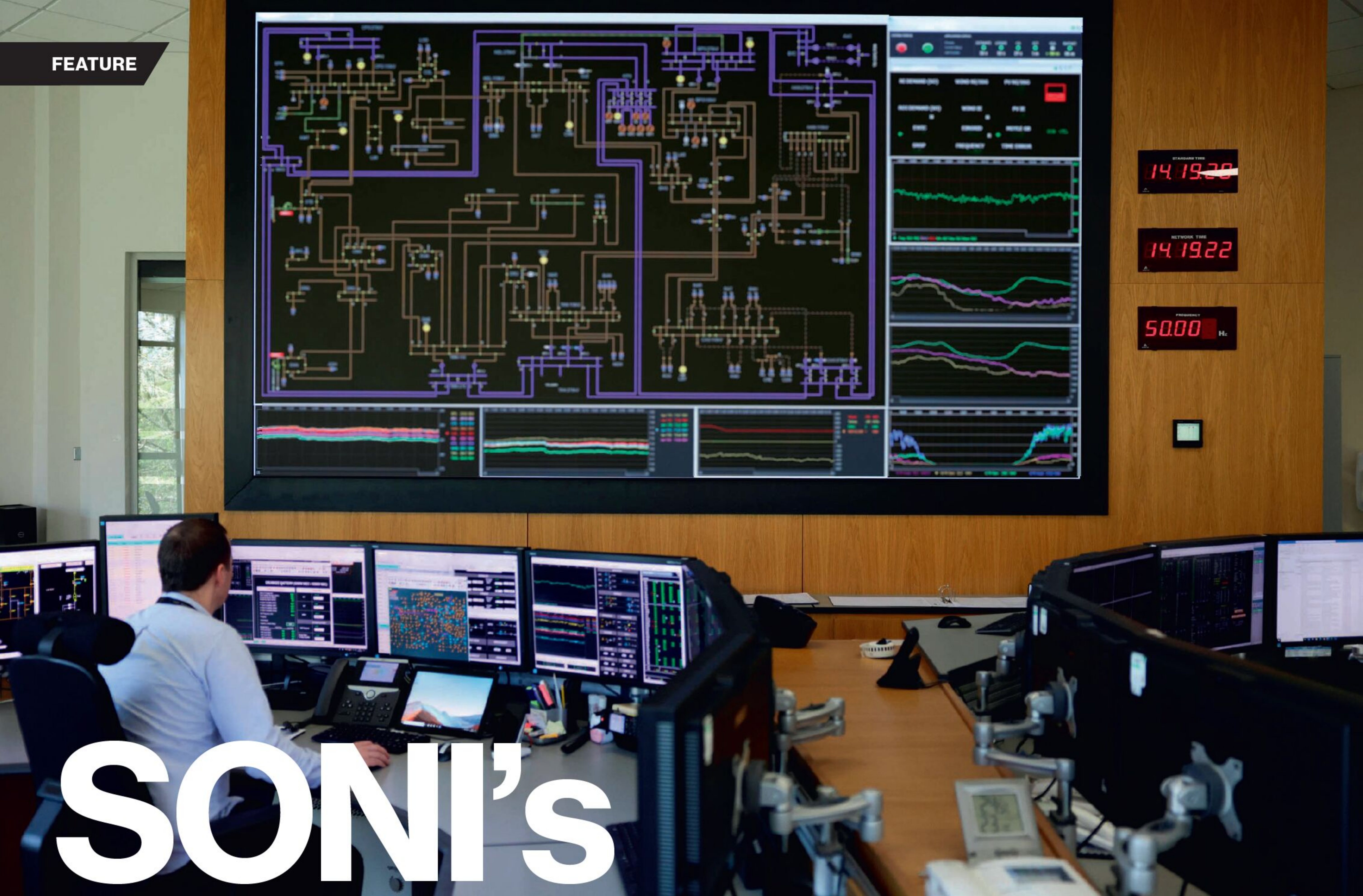


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SONI's Energy Vision

As the drive for cleaner energy sources is at an all-time high, SONI (System Operator for Northern Ireland) has stepped up its plans with the launch of its new strategy. Kevin O'Neill, SONI's Director of Strategy and Regulation, explains those plans, which will help transform Northern Ireland's electricity grid and ensure it is equipped to meet both environmental goals and the needs of consumers.

There is no doubt that businesses across Northern Ireland are recognising the transformative potential of AI.

SONI's role in planning and operating the transmission system is crucial, not only for the security and reliability of electricity across Northern Ireland but also for its economic impact. Its new multi-year strategy (2025-2031) focuses on the key question: Are we doing enough within the current arrangements to meet future demands, particularly in relation to climate change?

"We've always done the core work, but we must now look ahead to what needs to happen in the future. We're focusing on how we can adapt our strategy to manage the energy transition effectively," Kevin begins. The strategy's overarching aim is to ensure Northern Ireland's grid is fit for a renewable energy future while maintaining reliability and affordability.

SONI is shifting to a more proactive and "plan-led" approach to grid development. This approach will help drive the speed and efficiency of the grid's transformation but requires significant planning ahead of time. Kevin says the need to anticipate future demand and investment is key: "We want to build out the grid ahead of time. If we can bring investments forward, it sends strong signals to investors – both in generation and industry. However, the traditional approach doesn't align with the speed of change required for decarbonisation. The pace and urgency have shifted – we need to move faster. The key is having clarity on where to invest, understanding market signals, and considering where developers are looking to build, whether in the west, east, or elsewhere. There may also be options to bring demand closer to where renewable energy is generated."

Planning for the next 25 to 30 years is critical, particularly in light of the 2050 climate goals. At the heart of SONI's strategy is a renewed purpose: "meeting Northern Ireland's energy needs, today and in the future." To achieve this, the strategy sets out four key ambitions. First, it focuses on operating the grid safely, securely, and reliably while integrating new technologies to support greater renewable electricity use. Second, it commits to advising the government and regulators by providing expert insights and data on electricity systems and markets. Third, it prioritises planning the optimal future design of the electricity system and markets through evidence-based forecasting and research. Finally, it emphasises delivering essential projects in collaboration with NIE Networks to upgrade and transform the grid's infrastructure in line with Northern

Ireland's energy ambitions.

A core part of the strategy is to accommodate a significant increase in renewable energy generation. Currently, the system is capable of running on up to 75% of intermittent renewable electricity at any given time – one of the highest percentages in the world. However, SONI aims to push that figure to 95% as part of its roadmap.

"We're seeing a growing focus on wind and solar energy because these are well established and understood. However, we're also looking at other technologies like long-duration storage solutions and inertia services to help ensure grid stability," Kevin explains.

Managing a grid with such a high share of renewable energy brings challenges. "We need to turn off local renewables when demand isn't there to keep the system operating safely. We need to figure out how to make use of that oversupply," he continues. This challenge is also an opportunity – SONI is keen to collaborate on what business models could be deployed to avail of these resources – be that demand based or storage based. As Northern Ireland's electricity grid evolves, ensuring that energy remains affordable for consumers is a key concern. SONI, however, only represents a small portion of the domestic bill – roughly 2%. Most of the costs are driven by market factors, particularly the price of gas and fuels, which are out of SONI's control.

"The price of gas will continue to drive a large part of the energy bill, but by increasing local demand and using more renewable energy, the unit cost of electricity could decrease. We can't guarantee that, but we can certainly say that we're working to make the grid more efficient and cost-effective," Kevin explains.

SONI's strategy also places a strong emphasis on collaboration. A key part of its approach is working closely with regulators, policymakers, and the private sector. "We've engaged extensively with our partners across society, industry, and statutory bodies to ensure our strategy reflects their priorities. Only with deeper collaboration and an agile regulatory environment can we achieve our collective ambition," Kevin says.

Moreover, SONI's work extends beyond the electricity grid – it is actively involved in supporting policy around renewable energy. SONI is working with government departments to support energy policies' development and alignment with market and grid needs.

A critical part of SONI's strategy involves educating the public and engaging with communities affected by infrastructure developments. Kevin emphasises: "We've been doing a lot of work to engage with communities, especially those impacted by new infrastructure. It's essential that we balance the burdens and benefits of these developments. Moving forward

isn't just about building infrastructure; it's about making sure people understand the long-term benefits of a greener, more sustainable energy system. It's not just about the technology – it's about ensuring that everyone is on the same page."

Looking ahead, he sees a future where Northern Ireland can achieve its net zero ambitions. This will require continued investment, policy alignment, and technological innovation.

"We need to start talking in terms of carbon," Kevin continues. "We're talking about reducing carbon emissions, and that will help drive investment and decision-making. The more we focus on carbon reduction, the clearer it becomes to everyone why these investments are essential."

It is the biggest transition in SONI's history. "It's certainly more complex than ever. The key thing is we're constantly planning ahead. One of our roles is to do long-term planning, to see what's coming. The strategy is about what we need to do on the network and operationally, what we need to do in the markets, and how we collaborate – there are a lot of people involved in this."

With a bold new strategy in place, SONI is stepping up to play a proactive role in Northern Ireland's energy transition, ensuring that the electricity system is ready for the challenges – and opportunities – of a cleaner, more sustainable future.

"We're seeing a growing focus on wind and solar energy because these are well established and understood. However, we're also looking at other technologies like long-duration storage solutions and inertia services to help ensure grid stability."



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4. WOMEN WHO HAVE OVERCOME ADVERSITY

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It's simple, just pick the category and woman you want to vote for at ulstertatler.com, following the guidelines below. Just remember we are looking for women who have made a significant contribution to life in Northern Ireland (no matter how big or small). You can nominate someone in as many categories as you want but you can only nominate someone once in each category. A shortlist for each category will be published in the June Ulster Tatler. An independent judging panel will then decide on the winner in each category. Please note that the decision of the judges is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Whoever you nominate must be from Northern Ireland or based here. All the short-listed nominees must be prepared to take part in pre and post-event publicity. In order for your nomination to count you must fill in your contact details.

VOTING CLOSSES WEDNESDAY 23RD APRIL 2025, TO NOMINATE SOMEONE VISIT ULSTERTATLER.COM.



Shifting the Dial

A few weeks into her role as Economy Minister, NI Chamber sat down with Dr. Caoimhe Archibald to discuss her ambition for the region's economy and how her department intends to deliver on the promise of a globally competitive and sustainable economy.

She begins optimistically, saying, “I am really enjoying the role. It’s a department with a huge remit as there is so much that falls under the broad Economy umbrella.

“Luckily, I was Chair of the Economy Committee in the last mandate. I worked very closely with Conor Murphy when the Executive wasn’t sitting, developing our plans for this department because we knew Sinn Féin wanted to take it on. We came into the Executive with a strong idea about what we wanted to do, and I’m very bought into the plans that Conor Murphy put in place, so it’s really been a case of picking up the

reins and continuing in that direction of travel. Obviously, I have my own ideas and perspective that I’ll bring but huge progress has been made in the past year and lots of exciting things already initiated. It has been enjoyable to get out and about to hear about how some of those are impacting already.”

In February last year, the Department for the Economy published its Economic Vision, which outlined key objectives around good jobs, productivity, regional balance and decarbonisation, which the Minister says has been driven by collaboration.

“Strong co-design processes have

been built into that Vision. Engaging with business and academia, and all those who are involved in the roll-out of these plans is important, as they are the ones actually delivering many of them.

“One of the things that Conor Murphy did as Minister was to appoint critical friends. Building on that, I will soon be establishing a Ministerial Engagement Forum. This will be a cross-sector group of representatives who I will engage with to help inform and shape my thinking. I will chair this group which I hope will be able to develop solutions to some of our barriers to economic development. That’s important in



“Looking at the next five years or more, I would like to see the dial shift on the metrics that that we have persistently performed poorly on. More importantly, I would like people to feel a change, so when it comes to persistent problems like regional imbalance or productivity, I would like people to feel like those things have shifted.”

terms of us being able to bring forward plans that people have bought into.”

Whilst new to the Economy portfolio, Caoimhe has recent Executive experience to call on, having most recently been Finance Minister.

“Being in Finance gives you a useful insight into how Treasury view us and what we need to do to successfully negotiate - whether that’s in respect of our budget or level of need, which is a really important negotiation that we are hoping to make progress on in the very near future.

“One of the important things when you are trying to make an argument, for example, about our level of need, is that you’re doing so with an evidence base. That goes back to how we work with business and others to make the best possible case. The best way to do that, from my perspective, is to do it in partnership.

“Recent surveys carried out by business organisations show that businesses are not very confident about economic growth. And they’ve being hit hard in

terms of the British Government’s Budget. When you look at some of that data, you can really understand why confidence isn’t in the place that we would like it to be.

“It is a very challenging outlook with global affairs creating further uncertainty. None of that is helpful if you’re making business decisions and you’re thinking about where you want to invest. It’s a very challenging landscape but we have to generate a sense of hope that is backed up by a policy environment that is supportive.”

Delving into specific challenges, we asked the Minister about her plans to address Northern Ireland’s skills crisis, an issue which she acknowledges ‘underpins the delivery of everything else.’

“We need to get it right and there’s a lot of work to do. The Skills Council has been in place for a couple of years and has been doing really good work. And we have sectoral action plans, as well as a number of specific skills action plans. For example, we have a Digital Skills Action Plan in place, and a Green Skills Action Plan that will be announced in the coming weeks.

“The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre published the Skills Barometer recently, which highlighted the priority sectors where jobs are going to be created in the next number of years. It very much aligned with what our priority sectors are but also highlighted the scale of the challenge that we face in terms of access to skilled workers. There are different reasons for that, one being lack of access to EU workers but also persistent levels of people who are long-term unemployed and those with barriers to work or training. That’s something we are really focusing on as a department; ensuring that there are pathways for everybody.”

Looking at the region’s high potential growth sectors, she pointed to seven priority sector action plans.

“It’s about working with particular sectors and understanding what the

needs are, where the gaps are and how the department can support.

“The feedback that we get from the cyber sector for example, is very positive and that’s being endorsed by new announcements, like Napier AI, who announced the creation of 100 new jobs in Belfast. When I asked them why they chose here – it’s our skilled workforce, our people. They also referenced our progressive society, which I was pleased to hear. Those are jobs that align with the economic vision - good jobs, which pay well with good conditions.”

Earlier this year, the Executive published its Programme for Government, which prioritised the creation of a globally competitive and sustainable economy.

“My ambition is to deliver against those commitments”, she concludes.

“Looking at the next five years or

more, I would like to see the dial shift on the metrics that we have persistently performed poorly on. More importantly, I would like people to feel a change, so when it comes to persistent problems like regional imbalance or productivity, I would like people to feel like those things have shifted.

“We can point to individual sectors where we are already excellent and we have an awful lot to build on, with emerging ones as well. So, it’s about creating a sense that things have actually improved.

“It’s about delivery on plans and people genuinely feeling a sense of hope in terms of their own lives, that they feel an impact in terms of greater prosperity and that there is ambition for this place.”



Danske Bank Supports Vision Fabrications With Over £2.6m Investment In New Premises

Steelworks manufacturer, Vision Fabrications, has announced an investment of over £2.6million in new premises located at Knockmore Hill Industrial Park in Lisburn. The investment was supported by Danske Bank.

Vision Fabrications, with the support of Danske Bank, purchased a five-acre plot of land located in Knockmore Hill Industrial Park, Lisburn and has redeveloped it into a new 25,000sq ft factory space for mild and stainless steel manufacturing. The funds were also used to expand the existing Vision Fabrications premises to 35,045sq ft, allowing additional space for offices as the business continues to grow.

Established in 2017 by Barry Lytte, Vision Fabrications designs, manufactures and installs a wide range of steelwork solutions, working across a range of sectors including rail, commercial, residential and hospitality.

The company has completed work on multiple large scale projects in recent months, including the new York Street Station in Belfast where Vision Fabrications designed, fabricated and installed the main station structural steel work, east stair platform, link bridge and tapered platform canopies.

Vision Fabrications is also using Danske Bank's support to invest in the growth of its team, employing six additional members of staff, including Head of Operations. The company currently has a dedicated team of 35 employees, with a wealth of experience within stainless steel, mild steel and aluminium solutions.



• Barry Lytte, Managing Director at Vision Fabrications with Paul Robinson, Senior Business Manager at Danske Bank at Vision Fabrications in Lisburn.

Barry Lytte, Managing Director at Vision Fabrications said: "The purchase of the new Knockmore site is an exciting addition to the Vision Fabrications brand, allowing us to service the growing demand for steel fabrication, delivering high value and complex projects throughout the UK and Ireland from design through to installation.

"Working with Danske Bank has enabled us to comfortably expand our premises and invest in the growth of our team, with consistent support and engagement throughout our banking relationship."

Paul Robinson, Senior Business Manager

at Danske Bank said: "The demand for steel fabrication remains high across Northern Ireland and Danske Bank is delighted to be providing support for Vision Fabrications as the business continues to expand and grow. Vision Fabrications has gone from strength to strength over the last few months, completing a number of high profile and exciting projects across multiple sectors. We are looking forward to continuing to work together and supporting them through this exciting new chapter, and as they continue to grow."



NI Chamber Chief's

UPDATE

Suzanne Wylie,
Chief Executive, NI Chamber

As our membership base across Northern Ireland continues to grow, I am thrilled to welcome almost 40 new businesses to NI Chamber. The diverse mix of new members include some of the region's most innovative MedTech firms, established manufacturers, leading providers of professional services and well-known international brands. Whatever your business or the size of your company, the team and I look forward to getting to know your business and your colleagues and doing whatever we can to support you.

As well as supporting individual companies, we are continuing to influence key decision makers to deliver a stronger NI and more competitive economy, with a focus on some of the most consequential issues impacting companies here including access to skills, the cost of doing businesses, simplifying trade, energy transition, planning reform and infrastructure investment.

For example, we know business has a crucial role to play in shaping our future energy landscape and in February, we hosted the inaugural meeting of our new Energy Task and Finish Group, supported by our Energy Partners, SONI. This group, comprised of all the constituent parts of the energy sector including generators, suppliers, transmission & distribution operators, energy intensive industries, and other key parties, such as Translink and the Consumer Council, will deliver recommendations to government to help shape the 2025 review of the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy and our energy transition pathway.

Those of you who follow us on social media will also see that we took a business mission to North Carolina, where we have an arrangement with the North Carolina Chamber to create joint business alliances, research partnerships, and other business opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic – but more of that in the next edition.

The team has also been preparing an extensive conference, summit and events programme for 2025. We are very excited to be holding our second annual economic conference 'Momentum' on 3 April; focusing on how we can generate greater momentum behind economic growth during these uncertain times.

Looking ahead, we are already inviting exhibition bookings for September's Festival of Business, plus stay tuned for details for our new look Annual Lunch, which will be unveiled in the coming days. This and so much more is all part of a strategically collated calendar of activity, designed with and for our members. Keep an eye on our website for full details.

Welcome New Members

AI for SMEs	Lewis Silkin
Ards and North Down Borough Council	Live Like Loyalty
Axial3D	plannd
Brick & Stone Direct	Reddy Architecture + Urbanism
Brisk Technology	Roof Window Specialists
Brite Services Cleaning Company	Salesforce
Can-Tech Elastomers	Seagoe Hotel
Coding Fury	SEOPA
Creagh Concrete Products	Solasta Healthcare
Digg For Success	Susneo
FJJ Consulting	Tadela Consulting
Formative Architects	The Chartered Institute of Export & International Trade
Heathrow Airport	The House of Accountancy
Hub NI	The Playhouse
ICON Creative	Timoney Leadership Institute
iGen Entrepreneur	Trucorp
ignite empire ltd	Verus Search
IQ & Co	Young at Art
Jones Wisdom Trading	

* To become a member of NI Chamber
join online at
www.northernirelandchamber.com
or phone the membership team on 028 9024 4113

NI Chamber Events Gallery



- 1. Over 100 guests attended the first Regional Networking of 2025 at Charles Hurst.
- 2. Guests gathered to network and hear from Lorcan Flanagan at a Regional Networking event.
- 3. Vicky Summers (Historic Royal Palaces) and Brendan Gribben (Greenfields Ireland).
- 4. Sultan Mahmud (BT), Cat McCusker (NI Chamber), Health Minister Mike Nesbitt MLA, Suzanne Wylie (NI Chamber) and Peter May (Department of Health).



05



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09



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5. NI Chamber members gathered for an In Camera with the Department of Health.
6. Dr Karen Bonner spoke on the benefits of leadership and management training at a Future Workforce Series event.
7. Hollie Taggart (Smiley Monroe), Maeve McKendry (Jans Group) and Edel Healy (Jans Group) attended the Future Workforce event.
8. At a Business Breakfast for HR Professionals, John Campbell hosted a panel of People leaders including Gillian McAuley (Eakin Healthcare), Stacey Smyth (Musgrave NI), Karen Craig (GLL) and Camilla Long (Bespoke Communications).
9. Members of NI Chamber gathered at IFA Windsor Park to share ideas on a range of topics impacting HR professionals.
10. Clare Megarry (Danske Bank), Robert McCullough (Danske Bank) and Sarah Geoghegan (Danske Bank) at a GROW event in The Merchant.
11. 80+ NI Chamber members attended The Merchant to hear from Seating Matters on its business journey.



11

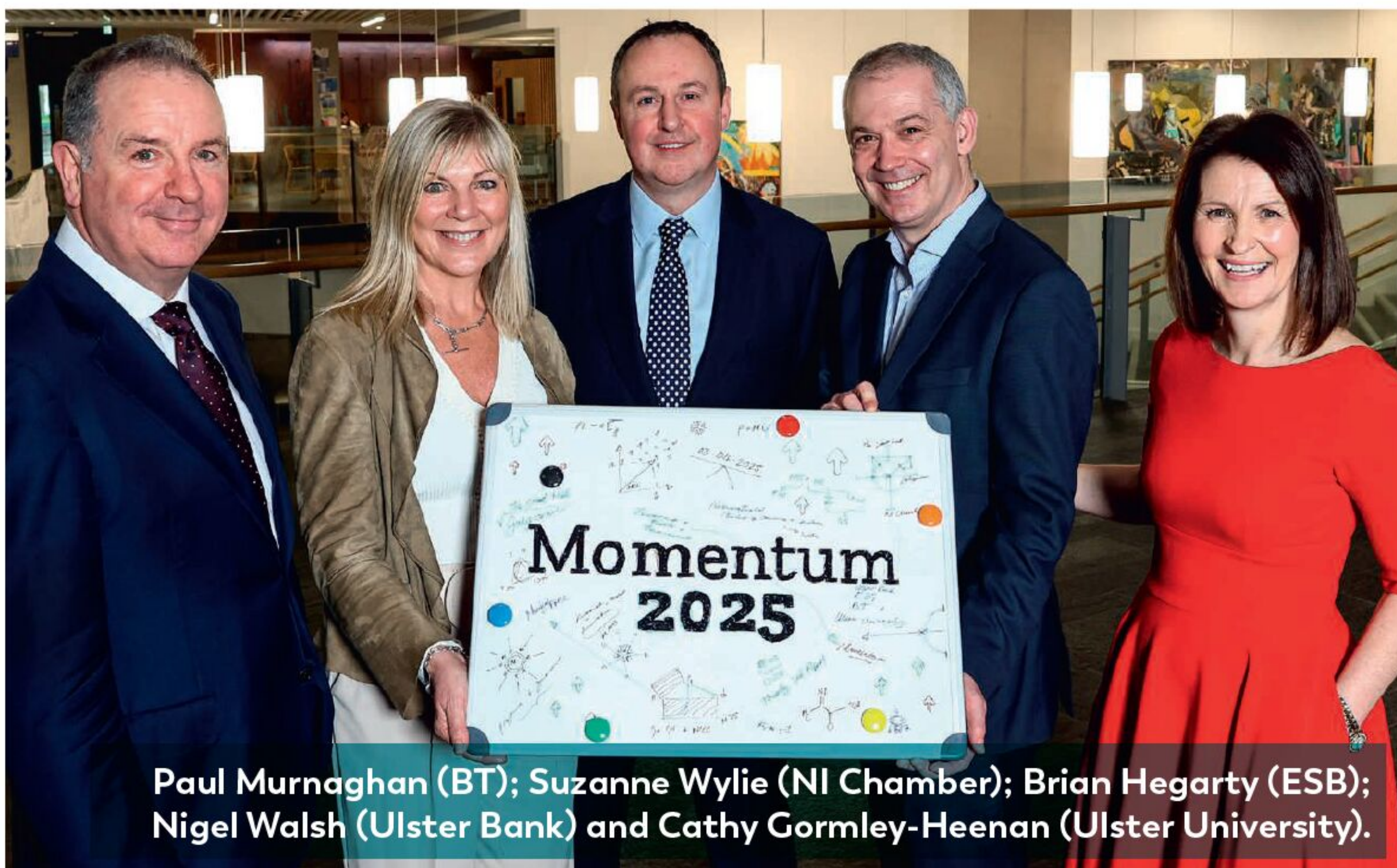
Gaining 'Momentum' on Economic Growth

NI Chamber's flagship economic conference, **Momentum** will return to Galgorm Resort, Ballymena on Thursday 3 April 2025. The event will bring together business leaders, policymakers and industry experts to discuss the actions needed to advance a globally competitive and sustainable economy in Northern Ireland.

Economy Minister Dr. Caoimhe Archibald will address the conference, alongside keynote speaker Andy Haldane, who is CEO at the Royal Society of Arts and a former chief economist at the Bank of England.

Aligning with the priorities in the recently published Programme for Government, **Momentum** will explore key pillars for driving economic prosperity, focusing on expanding market reach and seizing global opportunities through exports, harnessing new ideas, technology and talent with innovation and creating an environment for sustainable growth via investment. Specifically, the conference programme will look at opportunities for public private sector collaboration, how City Deals can be used to stimulate growth, the need for planning reform and enhanced connectivity, as well as how to best articulate Northern Ireland's competitive advantages.

On the day, attendees will hear diverse perspectives from more than twenty speakers and panellists including Sebastian Burnside, chief economist at NatWest Group, Professor Jodie Carson, Professor of Strategic Policy at Ulster University, the chair of Invest NI, John Healy and the CEO of Belfast International Airport, Daniel Owens.



Paul Murnaghan (BT); Suzanne Wylie (NI Chamber); Brian Hegarty (ESB); Nigel Walsh (Ulster Bank) and Cathy Gormley-Heenan (Ulster University).

Business Energy Taskforce to Facilitate the Green Transition



Alan Campbell, Chief Executive, SONI and Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive, NI Chamber.

NI Chamber and SONI have established a new Energy Task and Finish Group which will deliver policy recommendations to government and regulators to support the 2025 review of the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy.

The taskforce, which is focused on how energy policy can support Northern Ireland's economic growth, met for the first time in February. The group is comprised of 15 organisations incorporating all the constituent parts of the energy sector including generators, suppliers, transmission & distribution operators and energy intensive industries, as well as Translink and the Consumer Council.

The Taskforce is part of a package of decarbonisation initiatives set to be delivered by NI Chamber and its new Energy Partner, SONI.

Speaking ahead of inaugural meeting, Suzanne Wylie, Chief

Executive, NI Chamber said, "Getting the energy transition right is crucial if we are to develop a globally competitive and sustainable economy in Northern Ireland. This business-led group has been established to help facilitate and accelerate the green-transition across the region. It is here to act as a genuine enabler of government decision-making and to help align energy policy with the wider needs of the Northern Ireland economy and society.

"As a group, we are committed to working pragmatically and swiftly to support the next steps to be taken on the green transition. Business has a crucial role to play in shaping our energy landscape, and this taskforce is a powerful demonstration of our collective commitment to progress."

Alan Campbell, Chief Executive, SONI added, "Northern Ireland's clean energy transition is vital for decarbonising our society and tackling climate change, but it also offers huge opportunities for our economy. As Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, we aspire to use our experience, expertise and independence to act as a trusted adviser to government and regulators in the development and delivery of energy policy.

"SONI is delighted to support the Northern Ireland Chamber as their exclusive energy partner in taking forward this important, new collaboration following the success of the Energy Forum programme in recent years. The NI Chamber is uniquely positioned to bring business, the energy industry, government and regulators together to explore further opportunities to ensure we fully realise the economic and societal potential of Northern Ireland's energy transition."

Seating Matters Share Growth Story

Martin Tierney, Managing Director of Seating Matters shared his business growth story with NI Chamber members at a recent Grow with Danske Bank event in The Merchant Hotel, Belfast.

Martin has been widely recognised for the unique company culture he has developed at Seating Matters, a Limavady headquartered family firm which creates therapeutic seating to improve quality of life for people with disabilities.

Attendees were guided through the company's growth journey and learned how adopting Lean thinking and creating a culture of continuous improvement can improve business efficiency, quality and sustainability.

GROW with Danske Bank is part of a series of initiatives supported by NI Chamber's SME Partner, Power NI.



Jonathan Campbell (NI Chamber); Martin Tierney (Seating Matters) and Peter Houston (Danske Bank).

2025 Business Breakfast Series Launched



Mark Cunningham (Head of Regional Business Centres, Bank of Ireland UK), Suzanne Wylie (CEO, NI Chamber) and Karen Craig (People Business Partner at GLL) launch NI Chamber's 2025 Business Breakfast Series with Bank of Ireland.

Speaking about the launch of the 2025 series, Suzanne Wylie, CEO, NI Chamber said:

"More than 400 member companies attended the Business Breakfast Series last year, as it continues to grow in popularity. This year, we are expecting even more ambitious professionals to come along as they realise the benefits of getting involved. We are thrilled to have Bank of Ireland's support and look forward to working with them on the development of another dynamic and interactive series, which enables professionals to learn and share best practice with their peers.

Mark Cunningham, Head of Regional Business Centres, Bank of Ireland UK added:

"Bank of Ireland are delighted to partner with NI Chamber to bring the Business Breakfast series back for 2025. These events provide learning, support and advice from industry peers, who are innovating and leading across a variety of business disciplines, in an environment where

businesses can connect and create new opportunities.

"This is an important year for Bank of Ireland as we celebrate 200 years of supporting businesses across Northern Ireland. While much has changed over that time our commitment to our customers has not. We are ambitious for our future, as we strive to enable even more businesses to grow and succeed."

The next event in this series is a Business Breakfast for Marketing Professionals on Friday 9 May in Magheramorne Estate, Larne. To register, visit the NI Chamber website.

NI Chamber's popular Business Breakfast Series is back for 2025. It kicked off with an event for HR professionals in Windsor Park. Delivered in partnership with Bank of Ireland, the morning gathering brought people leaders from diverse organisations together to share best practice in talent management.

Attendees had the opportunity to learn from HR stalwarts including Gillian McAuley (Chief People Officer at Eakin Healthcare), Karen Craig (People Business Partner at GLL) and Camilla Long (Co-Founder of Bespoke Communications).

Now in its fourth year, the Business Breakfast Series with Bank of Ireland provides learning and networking opportunities for ambitious professionals working in core business areas which over the coming months are also set to include Marketing, Innovation and Finance.

BT Group celebrates International Women’s Day

BT Group has been championing female colleagues with a week of festivities around International Women’s Day, honouring remarkable women within BT Group and beyond.

At a Remarkable Women event, Suzanne Wylie (CEO, NI Chamber), Elizabeth Sands (Founder, Elizabeth Sands Beauty School) & Lorraine Harrison (Director of IT Services, Graham Construction) shared their stories which were a reminder of the resilience, determination and potential of women in Northern Ireland.

It wasn’t just about celebrating established talent but creating opportunities for future generations too. BT’s partnership with SistersIN, which provides mentoring for 16–18-year-old girls is a key part of its ‘Better on BT’ strategy. With 50 mentor matches across 27 schools, BT welcomed schoolgirls from across the province for a day of career workshops and learning, deigned to inspire and empower the next generation of leaders.



1. Panellists and organisers of BT’s Remarkable Women event.

2. Eleanor Hudson, Director of Contract Management, BT Business.

3. BT’s Remarkable Women event audience.

4. SistersIN participants work together to discover their personality profile.
5. Suzanne Wylie, Elizabeth Sands, Lorraine Harrison and Eleanor Hudson.

6. Suzanne Wylie, Fiona Vines, Eleanor Hudson.

7. Mentors and mentees on the SistersIN programme.



Northern Ireland
Chamber of Commerce
and Industry

Save the Date for NI Chamber's 2025 Flagship events



3

APRIL
THURSDAY

Momentum Conference

THE GREAT HALL, GALGORM



20

JUNE
FRIDAY

Annual Lunch

TITANIC BELFAST



12

SEPTEMBER
FRIDAY

Annual Golf Day

GALGORM CASTLE



17

SEPTEMBER
WEDNESDAY

Festival of Business

ST GEORGE'S MARKET,
BELFAST



16

OCTOBER
THURSDAY

Future Workforce Summit

DUNADRY HOTEL
AND GARDENS



6

NOVEMBER
THURSDAY

Meet the Buyer

KINGFISHER
COUNTRY ESTATE



27

NOVEMBER
THURSDAY

President's Banquet

ICC BELFAST

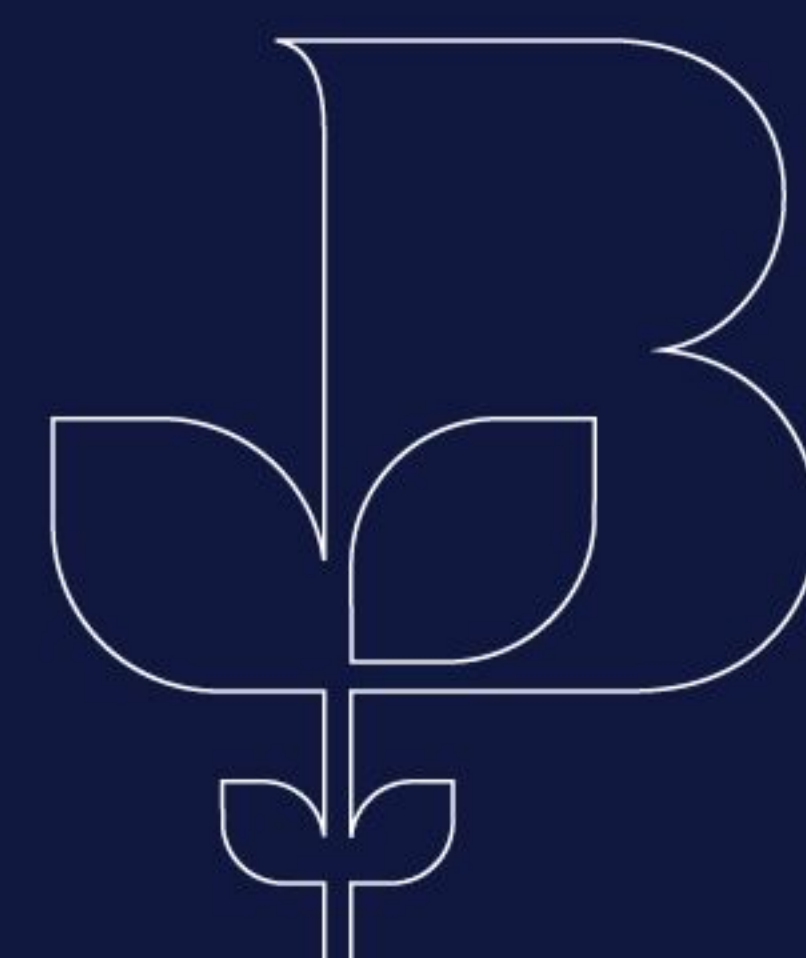


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Together We Thrive

– Women's Football and the Business Community

With two major announcements at the Irish Football Association (IFA) in recent weeks, we speak with Angela Platt, Director of Women's Football, about the evolving landscape of the sport, future prospects, and opportunities for businesses.

Women's football in Northern Ireland has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, with increasing participation, greater visibility, and notable success at the international level. At the heart of this progress is Angela Platt, Director of Women's Football.

Three years into the role, Angela is perfectly placed to introduce an ambitious strategy that will further develop the women's game and continue the momentum it has enjoyed in recent times. A former Ireland women's hockey and Northern Ireland women's football international goalkeeper, Angela brings a

wealth of sporting experience to her role. Earning 75 caps for Ireland between 2000 and 2006, she represented the country at the 2002 Women's Hockey World Cup. Her leadership off the field has been just as impactful, having served as executive manager of Ulster Hockey from 2010 to 2017 before taking on the role of general manager at the Northern Cricket Union. "I'm three and a half years into this role, and during that time there have been a lot of positives in terms of the game's development and growth. I've seen a lot of younger players joining, an increase in the number of teams, the elevation of players in our senior women's team, and, of course, qualifying for the Euros, which really boosted our profile and encouraged more women and girls to get involved. We're also seeing more teams and players in areas where women's football never really had a presence," she begins.

With such progress, it's only natural that Angela is enthused about the future of women's football, particularly with the senior team undergoing significant changes under the leadership of Tanya Oxtoby. "The changes Tanya is making – moving the team up the rankings, lowering the average age, and ensuring players are in the highest-performing environments – demonstrate that she is building for the future," she continues.

The FA's new women's and girls' strategy, recently showcased, is another boost for the sport's future. "This strategy is about ensuring we continue progressing at all levels of the game," Angela explains. "We have identified five key areas – our strategic pillars – where we will invest our time, energy, and resources." The five pillars are: Fun Football – "This focuses on making football accessible to all, ensuring that people can play for fun

“Businesses have a role to play in helping us grow the game, whether through sponsorship, investment in facilities, or supporting community programmes.”

and enjoy the benefits that come with that.” Clubs and Competitions is another pillar. “Clubs are the lifeblood of the sport. We want to support them in becoming sustainable and improving the competitive level of the game,” Angela adds, before moving onto the third pillar; Performance Pathway. “That’s about developing our international structures and focusing on the success of our national teams.” People Development, the fourth pillar, is about “Investing in those working in the game, including coaches, administrators, and referees”, while Profile and Visibility will ensure the sport continues progressing in terms of growth. “We need to continue increasing the platform for women’s football, ensuring it gets the recognition it deserves.” Angela is keen to highlight the vital role businesses play in supporting women’s football and supporting that fifth pillar. “There’s a lot of synergy between team sports and business,” she says. “That’s why our strategy is called Together We Thrive – Elevating the Game for Everyone.” She says there has already been great corporate support for the women’s game, but there are more opportunities for both businesses and the sport. “We need to create opportunities for businesses to come to games, engage with teams, and see the impact of their support firsthand. Football, like business, is about learning, working together, and problem-solving – it brings value to every area of Northern Ireland.”

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives also present an opportunity. “Businesses have a role to play in helping us grow the game, whether through sponsorship, investment in facilities, or supporting community programmes,” she adds.

A strategy is only as strong as its implementation, and Angela is clear about its importance. “We have a strategic plan, and we’re now entering a new phase of that. I want to pay tribute to those who put the foundations in place—it’s about building on that success and recognising where we need to keep pushing forward.” For long-term success, she emphasises the need for collaboration. “It’s what keeps us on track and focused. Our core purpose is to work together with all our partners and stakeholders to ensure we continue

growing the game.”

However, challenges remain. “Access to facilities, media coverage, and leadership opportunities for women have always been areas where progress is needed,” Angela acknowledges. “But we’re at a different level now. We’re providing greater opportunities and making football more accessible to girls across the country.” Beyond the senior team, ensuring a strong player development pathway is a key focus of the new strategy. “We’re reviewing the women’s football pyramid to make sure it works for everyone. This is an exciting opportunity to create a sustainable structure that supports players at every level,” she says.

Another major development in the sport is the new National Football Centre at Galgorm. “I was incredibly proud to be part of this project,” Angela says. “It’s going to have a positive impact across all parts of football in Northern Ireland, particularly for our performance teams.”

The centre, still in its early planning stages, will provide world-class facilities for both male and female players. “There’s equality in this – boys, girls, men, and women will all benefit. We anticipate great opportunities for player development and

a real feel-good factor around the centre’s impact on the sport.”

Women’s football isn’t just about players – it’s also about creating opportunities for women in coaching, refereeing, and leadership roles. “We’re working with administrators and coaches to help develop leadership pathways,” Angela says. “It’s not just about women in football – it’s also about men supporting women. We need allies who champion female leaders in the sport.”

For Angela, leading women’s football in Northern Ireland is more than just a job – it’s a personal mission. “I take my role and responsibilities very seriously. I’m privileged to be in this position, and I want to represent the game to the best of my ability.”

Beyond that, she is determined to open doors for others. “What really drives me is seeing more women moving through leadership roles in football. If I can inspire and support others along the way, that’s the most rewarding part of my job.

“And, if we all work together, we can thrive – whether that’s as fans, players, coaches, or businesses supporting the game.”





18TH Ulster Tatler AWARDS 2025

18.09.25

BELFAST CITY HALL

THE CATEGORIES

01 FASHION BOUTIQUE OF THE YEAR

Tell us the name of your top locally owned boutique. The category covers everything from clothes stores to shoe shops and all in between.

WN Wilson Nesbitt

02 INTERIOR DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

In this category just let us know the name of your favourite interior designer.

HAFELE

03 SPA OF THE YEAR

Tell us which spa you think deserves to win the title of Spa of the Year. Which spa has worked wonders for you?

IGNITE EMPIRE Ltd.
INSPIRE YOUR SUCCESS
INVESTING • BUYING • SELLING

04 HOTEL OF THE YEAR

Which hotel stands out to you as top class in everything from hospitality to food service? Here's your chance to recognise their effort.

DAVID SCOTT
TILE, BATH & STONE SPECIALISTS

05 BEAUTY SALON OF THE YEAR

In this category you can vote for any salon in Ulster. Which beauty salon do you always leave feeling amazing?

 **RADIANCE**
BEAUTY & DAY SPA

06 COFFEE HOUSE OF THE YEAR

Tell us the best coffee shop you have been to lately? Simply let us know where you think deserves to be crowned Coffee House of the Year.

Mark McCallister
Carpets

07 RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR

Where have you had your best meal lately? Just let us know the name of your favourite restaurant.

KITCHENS &
FITTED INTERIORS
by
JOHANNA

08 SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

All we need is the name and sport of the person you are voting for.

09 HAIRDRESSING SALON OF THE YEAR

In this category just let us know the name of your favourite hairdressing salon.

 **DUFFYRAFFERTY**
Communications

10 CELEBRITY OF THE YEAR

For this category just let us know the name and profession of the person you are voting for.

Aesthetic BY AGNE
Clinic

11 AESTHETIC CLINIC OF THE YEAR

Tell us which clinic you think deserves to win the title of Aesthetic Clinic of the Year. Which aesthetic clinic has worked wonders for you?

 **EMERALD**™ BY  **ERCHONIA**
World Leaders in Low Level Laser Technology

12 BUSINESSWOMAN OF THE YEAR

All we need is the name and company of the person you are voting for along with a statement of up to 500 words on why they should win.



THE COURTYARD,
CARRICKFERGUS

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VOTE ONLINE: [ULSTERTATLER.COM](https://ulstertatler.com)

VOTE NOW



13 BUSINESSMAN OF THE YEAR

All we need is the name and company of the person you are voting for along with a statement of up to 500 words on why they should win.

14 FASHION DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

All we need is the name and company of the person you are voting for along with a statement of up to 500 words on why they should win.

LAIRD LAW
FOR HIM & FOR HER

15 ARTS PERSONALITY OF THE YEAR

Send us the name of the person you are voting for along with a statement of up to 500 words on why they should win. We are looking for someone who works in any field within the arts or an artist who has made a significant contribution to the arts scene.



16 FAMILY BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

All we need is the name of the business you are voting for along with a statement of up to 500 words on why they should win.



THESE AWARDS ARE NOT VOTED ON BY THE PUBLIC

17. OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION AWARD

This award is given to a business person who has made significant contribution to their sector over many years.



MAGHERAMORNE
ESTATE

18 BEST DRESSED ON THE NIGHT

This accolade will be judged and awarded at the Ulster Tatler Awards ceremony. This category is not voted on by the public.

19 SPECIAL MERIT AWARD

Previous recipients include the Northern Ireland football team, Ulster rugby legends Rory Best, Tommy Bowe and Tyrone GAA.



20 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

This award is given to someone who has made a significant contribution to life in Northern Ireland. Past winners include Ciaran Hinds, Gerry Armstrong, Michael Longley, Dame Mary Peters, Brian Friel, Sir James Galway, Gloria Hunniford, Phil Coulter and Terri Hooley.

THE CLOSING DATE FOR NOMINATIONS IS MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY 6TH JULY 2025.

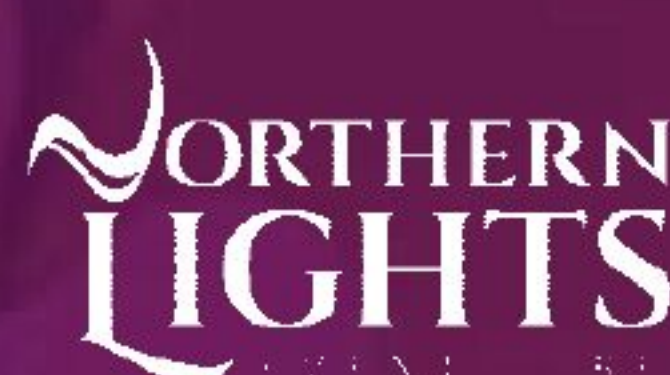
TERMS AND CONDITIONS

How to vote?

It's simple, just pick the category and the company/person you want to vote for at ulstertatler.com, following the guidelines below. Just remember that we are looking for local companies/people who have made a significant contribution to life in Northern Ireland and you can vote for as many categories as you want. A shortlist for each category will be published in the August edition of Ulster Tatler. An independent judging panel will then decide on the winner for each category. Please note that the decision of the judges is final and no correspondence will be entered into. If you are voting for someone in categories 1 to 11, all you need to do is let us know the name of the person or company you are voting for, along with their company contact details, where appropriate. For categories 12, 13, 14 and 15 in addition to their name, contact details and category, please forward a short statement (maximum 500 words) on why the entry should win. Categories 16-19 are not voted on by the public. Whoever you vote for must be from Northern Ireland or based here. All short listed nominees must be prepared to take part in pre and post show event publicity. In order for your vote to count you must fill in all your contact details.

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Bright Future

Ortus Energy Drives Solar Adoption in Northern Ireland

Ortus Energy Ireland is making waves on the island of Ireland in the renewable energy sector, driven by the leadership of Andrew Marsden and John Liston. With a deep understanding of the market and a commitment to sustainable solutions, Ortus Energy Ireland is poised to become a key player in the island of Ireland's transition to a cleaner energy future.

Ortus Energy Ireland is spearheaded by Director Andrew Marsden, a seasoned real estate and renewable energy expert. Marsden's history in the field includes co-founding Lightsource Renewable Energy in 2010, which became Europe's leading solar developer by 2015 and is now wholly owned by BP. Now, with Ortus Energy, Marsden is revisiting his passion for the C&I solar sector, recognising the significant shift in market dynamics that make solar PPAs a compelling proposition for businesses today.

A Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) is a solution provided by Ortus Energy, which enables organisations to make the switch to low-cost, clean energy without any capital expenditure and with the added benefit of having the system maintained.

Instead of purchasing 100% of your electricity from a traditional grid-connected supplier, you generate

your own clean, green energy by way of a solar PV system on your own premises, thereby cutting energy costs and greatly reducing carbon emissions. The installation of renewable technology will also future-proof against ever-changing government legislation and charges on carbon reduction in the commercial sector.

"The time is ripe for C&I solar in Ireland," explains Marsden. "Soaring energy prices, coupled with decreasing installation costs, make solar PPAs an incredibly attractive financial proposition. Businesses can now stabilise their energy costs, reduce their carbon footprint, and significantly improve their operational efficiency."

Joining Marsden is John Liston, Commercial Director, who brings a proven track record of designing and delivering innovative solar PV solutions for a diverse range of sectors, including food processing, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing,

and hospitality. His expertise in navigating complex projects and building strong client relationships will be instrumental in Ortus's success.

"We're witnessing a surge in demand for solar solutions from businesses across the island," says Liston. "Our approach is to provide tailored PPAs that meet the specific needs of each client, ensuring a seamless and cost-effective transition to clean energy."

Ortus Energy has a proven track record of success, having already partnered with a range of leading businesses across various sectors, including manufacturing, farming, logistics, and retail. Some of their notable clients include Bentley Motors, Iceland Supermarkets, GE, Kia, Atlas Copco, and Hook Two Sisters.

Ortus Energy Ireland's commitment to delivering high-quality solar solutions is further bolstered by its partnership with

SSE. This collaboration provides Ortus Energy with access to substantial funding and resources, enabling it to scale its operations and expand its reach throughout the Irish and UK markets. With a powerful combination of experienced leadership, a customer-centric approach, and the backing of a major energy provider, Ortus Energy

Ireland is perfectly positioned to lead the charge in solar energy adoption across the island. Their focus on providing tailored PPAs empowers businesses to take control of their energy costs, reduce their environmental impact, and contribute to a greener future for Ireland.



John Liston.



Andrew Marsden.

“Soaring energy prices, coupled with decreasing installation costs, make solar PPAs an incredibly attractive financial proposition. Businesses can now stabilise their energy costs, reduce their carbon footprint, and significantly improve their operational efficiency.”

NEW PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN ULSTER BANK AND AIR AMBULANCE NI READY FOR LIFT OFF

Ulster Bank has announced a new charity partnership with Air Ambulance Northern Ireland (AANI), committing to fundraising for only Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) in the region.

Through fundraising, volunteering and raising awareness. Ulster Bank and AANI will work together in a strategic partnership to highlight the crucial work of this service and ensure that the charity is supported to continue to provide the very best, pre-hospital critical care.

On average, two individuals in Northern Ireland will find themselves in the need of care from AANI every day. Support helps the charity ensure its expert crew, comprised of a pilot, doctor and paramedic, can attend medical incidents 365 days of the year.

Colleen Milligan, Business Development Manager at AANI, welcomed the news of the new charity partnership:

“We are honoured to be chosen as Ulster Bank’s charity partner for 2025 and grateful to have their support. As a charitable organisation, we rely entirely on public donations so this will go a long way towards strengthening and sustaining the work that we do.

“This partnership will make a huge difference and help the HEMS team to continue to provide life-saving care in local communities when seconds really matter. We’re excited to work alongside Ulster Bank to raise awareness and make a lasting impact together.”

Terry Robb, Head of Retail at Ulster Bank NI explained colleagues were excited about the partnership and looking forward to surpassing last year’s fundraising total.

“A huge part of our ethos at Ulster Bank is to champion the

power of community, not just in our day-to-day operations, but with the impact we can have on society as a whole.

“The Air Ambulance Northern Ireland is an incredible organisation, and our colleagues are excited to get behind the partnership and do what we can do help them continue their vital work.

“In 2024, Ulster Bank raised an incredible amount of money for local charities but colleagues right across the bank also volunteered their time and their skills and this is certainly something we want to continue with this year.”



Sandra Wright, Head of Organisation and Workforce Design, NatWest Group; Kerry Anderson, AANI; James O’Callaghan, HEMS Paramedic; Colleen Milligan, AANI and David Sinton, Ulster Bank Branch Manager, Lisburn.



Columnist

Rebecca Hynds

EMEA Managing Director at Connor Consulting and an alumna of the MSc in Executive Leadership at Ulster University Business School.

Strategic Advantage of Leadership Development

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, the need for effective leadership has never been more critical. Organisations are facing unprecedented challenges; generative AI and the emergence of new technologies are disrupting industries, political and economic uncertainty are reshaping markets and a global workforce is seeking more autonomy, empowerment, and flexibility in their work.

A recent McKinsey report Building Leaders from the Ground Up found that CEOs today are confronting double the number of critical issues compared to just a decade ago. In this context, leadership development is not just a strategic advantage but a necessity.

What is one of the most valuable things leaders can do? Step back and reflect. Taking a step back from the daily grind allows leaders to reflect on their experiences, strengths, and areas for improvement. This self-awareness is crucial for personal growth and effective leadership. By understanding their own leadership style and impact, leaders can make more informed decisions and build stronger relationships with their teams.

Rebecca Hynds, EMEA managing director at Connor Consulting and an alumna of the MSc in Executive Leadership at Ulster University Business School (UUBS), experienced this first-hand, noting:

“Completing the MSc in Executive Leadership was an important step for me as it allowed me to reflect on my career journey and then move forward, enhancing my ability to lead with confidence and strategic vision. It helped me develop essential skills such as coaching, decision-making, team management, and effective communication, which are critical in guiding teams towards achieving goals. This course has truly enabled me to refine my leadership approach, and

gain a broader perspective on how to drive meaningful impact within an organisation.”

Rebecca's experience of the transformative impact that leadership development can have on an individual's career is one of many, and more than just theoretical learning. It's about real, tangible change that empowers leaders to elevate both themselves and the businesses in which they work.

How leadership development transforms organisations

The benefits of leadership development extend beyond individual growth. Organisations that invest in developing their leaders are better positioned to achieve their strategic objectives and drive sustainable growth. Effective leadership is crucial for fostering a positive organisational culture, enhancing employee engagement, and driving innovation.

At UUBS we design tailored programmes in collaboration with businesses, enabling leadership teams to grow together and learn from one another. A great example of this is Kainos, a company that partnered with UUBS for its Inspiring Leaders programme. Collette Kidd, chief people officer at Kainos, highlighted the organisational impact of leadership development:

“Our Inspiring Leaders programme provides current and future leaders with the skills and expertise to drive our business forward. Ulster University Business School helped us align our goals with best-practice leadership development tools and techniques, designing a leadership programme that fosters personal growth and organisational impact. Participants have not only demonstrated noticeable behavioural shifts that align more closely with our values and culture, but they are better armed to lead transformational change within Kainos, and we've seen

them transfer these skills on to their teams.”

By aligning leadership training with the company's values and strategic goals, Kainos has cultivated leaders who can drive transformational change and foster a culture of continuous improvement. And that is what leadership development is all about – something that not only builds leaders but leads to tangible improvements in organisational performance.

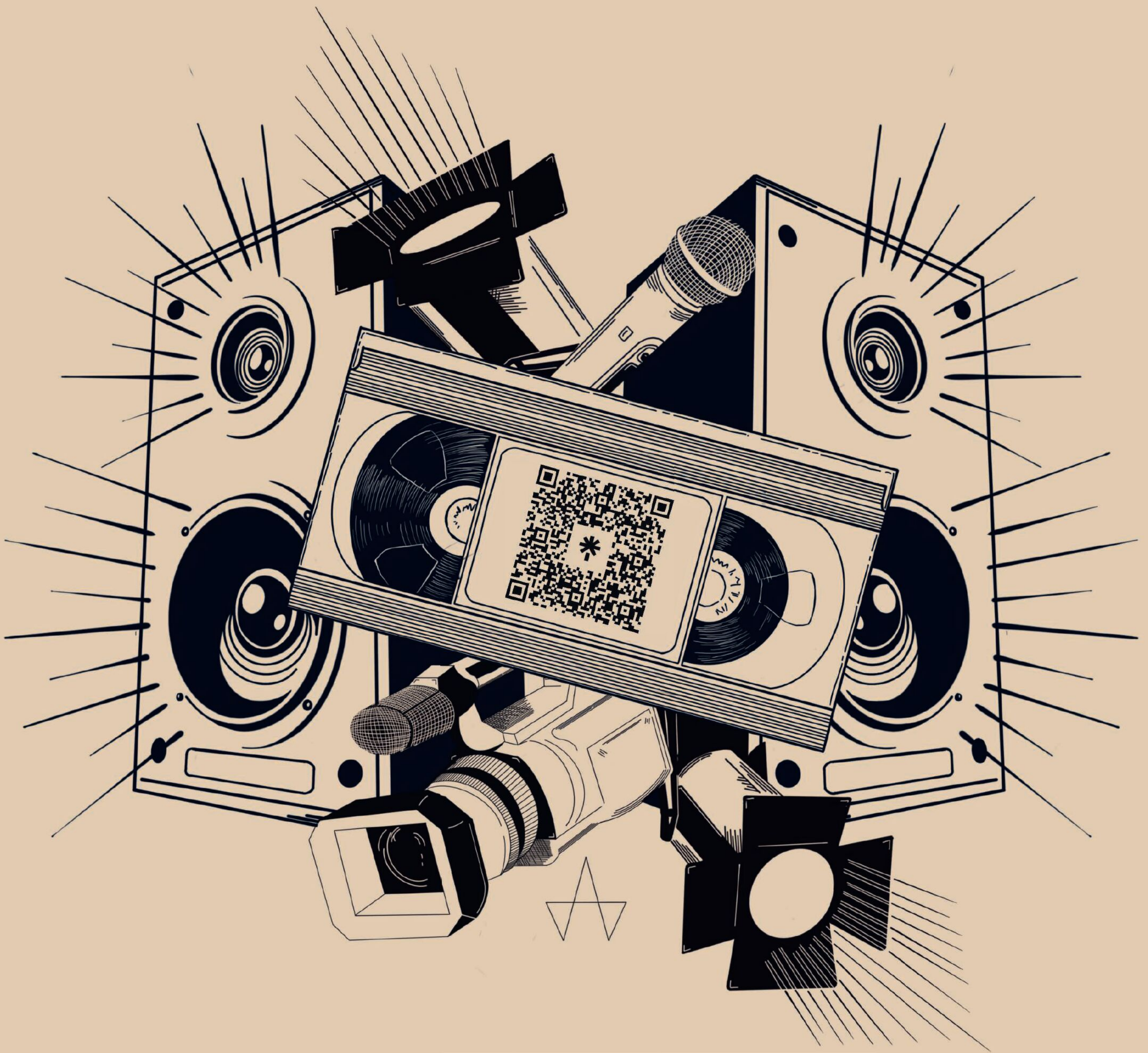
The urgency for leadership development is heightened by the current global context. The workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, with different generations, cultures, and perspectives coming together. Today's leaders must be able to navigate this diversity, creating an inclusive environment where all employees can thrive.

Investing in leadership now ensures that organisations are prepared to face challenges, today and in the future, head on. Resilient, adaptable, and strategic leaders are necessary for guiding their teams through times of change and uncertainty. And as highlighted, the impact of leadership programmes extends beyond individual growth – it has the power to transform organisations.

CEOs and leadership teams identify the biggest barriers to achieving their aspirations and reaching their full potential, and there is an urgent need to build leadership capabilities in their organisations – not only to ensure that they can successfully manage through today's disruptions but also to fortify themselves against tomorrow's inevitable shifts in the business environment.

If you would like to discuss how leadership and executive development solutions can add value to you or your business, contact UUBS's Business Engagement Team at: engage@ulster.ac.uk

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Managing Financial Legacies

Wealth in Northern Ireland is on the rise, bringing with it an increasing demand for expert financial planning and asset protection. Legacy Wealth Management, a locally owned financial services firm, has built a reputation for just that. We speak with Keith Liggett, the company's Managing Director.

Keith Liggett is at the helm of Legacy, which has carved out a strong reputation for its client-centric approach, delivering tailored financial solutions to both individuals and businesses. With significant assets under management, it is one of the largest locally owned financial planning firms in Ireland. He says the firm's growth is evidence of its customer-focused approach to business, as well as its ability to adapt and thrive in a landscape marked by rapid legislative changes and evolving client needs.

Recalling recent years in business, he says, "It's been exceptionally busy for us. Changes in the budget have really made people want to get more advice. Some may have buried their heads in the sand, but now they're seeking advice because they realise it's not going to get better on its own."

Legacy was founded with a core mission to provide bespoke, expert financial guidance to clients across Northern Ireland and beyond, especially in the wake of economic decisions that can impact wealth.

Keith says many turn to Legacy because it's an agile business. "We excel at what we do because we own the business, allowing us to adapt quickly and prioritise what's best for our clients."

The company's culture is defined by its commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for clients, he adds. Legacy advisors work together as a cohesive team, playing to their individual strengths. "When people join our team, they learn a lot and add to the intellectual property of the company," says Keith. "We empower them to take on responsibilities and share best practices."

This collaborative, client-first culture is not just about providing financial advice, he says—it's about creating long-lasting relationships. "Our approach is based on building long-term relationships. We want to be there for clients for 20, 30, or even 40 years." It's this approach that has afforded the firm a loyal client base.

Legacy offers comprehensive financial planning services for both individuals and businesses. For individuals, the firm focuses on

everything from estate planning to planning for retirement. According to Keith, the key to successful financial planning is understanding clients' goals. "The most important part for us is understanding their objectives. Whether it's ensuring a comfortable standard of living, purchasing a holiday home, reducing taxes, or looking after a loved one, we work with clients to create a plan that meets their specific needs."

With businesses, the approach is no different—Legacy works with companies to develop tailored strategies that align with their long-term goals. "There are a lot of family businesses in Northern Ireland and they know what they're doing. Our role is to make sure their companies are in the right place for their objectives, whether that's passing the business on to a family member, selling out, or planning for after death," he explains.



Columnist

Mike Nesbitt
Health Minister

Pursuing a Prosperity Agenda

If this Assembly collapses, I think this model of devolution is gone, forever. It's hard to imagine how to reboot it again, as another breakdown would require a renegotiation on the scale of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement – and is that possible in a world that has since invented and embraced social media and its associated alternative truths? I sense a collective agreement the answer is “no” and therefore a determination to make it work.

My strategy for delivery is to pursue a prosperity agenda – maximise the number of our citizens who wake up happy with their lot and retire to bed with some sense of achievement.

That Prosperity Agenda is measured in multiple matrices. It means people feeling financially secure; seeing their children and grandchildren well educated; having equitable access to world class public services and; enjoying a quality of life and standard of living that leaves them wanting more of the same.

Health and Social Care is critical to the delivery of that Prosperity Agenda. That is one reason why I was honoured to become Health Minister. I consider it the ultimate political challenge to deliver meaningful change - reforms that not only improve health outcomes but also contribute to tackling economic inactivity, reducing inequalities, and fostering a society where good health is recognised as the bedrock of individual, family and community access.

TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

Health inequalities in Northern Ireland are stark and unacceptable. Two babies, born the same day, in the same maternity unit in Belfast, could grow up a mile apart, one in the least deprived area, the other in the most deprived

and the differential in their healthy life expectancy will be 14.2 years! In a First World country, a quarter of the way into the 21st Century! How is that even acceptable?.

The causes of these disparities are complex, rooted in social, economic, and environmental factors - but they are not insurmountable. As underlined in my three- year plan, I am wedded to an ambitious programme of reform. We have to move from a reactive approach and invest in prevention. We need to “Shift Left” meaning a move from the current focus on curing the ill in our hospitals to keeping people safe and well in their communities.

My determination to tackle health inequalities is evidenced in my Live Better initiative, to bring programmes and support directly to communities. In an ideal world, if you need health and social care, you get it at home; if that is not possible, it's close to home, through primary, community and social care. The second worst solution is a visit to an acute hospital and the worst is having an overnight stay in an acute hospital.

HEALTH AND ECONOMIC INACTIVITY

A strong health system is not simply good for individuals, it is essential for our economy. Our rates of economic inactivity are shocking. The reasons why are numerous, but the evidence says the biggest factor is ill health, physical and mental – another example enforcing the benefit of joined up government.

LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE

The scale of the challenge in health and social care is immense, but the principles of change are solid – offer your vision and work tirelessly to engage, communicate and secure the buy-in of as many stakeholders as possible, mitigating the damage of

those who are not on board. My style is simple: surround yourself with the people who know the things you do not, create an atmosphere where they know they can speak out frankly but respectfully, and make your decisions accordingly. I would normally add the imperative of succession planning, but this is consociational politics and the next Minister of Health may be chosen by another political party.

HEALTH IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Health is a matter for every Executive Minister – equally, as Health Minister, I have a role in helping deliver the objectives of all my Executive colleagues. A healthier population benefits all aspects of society - businesses thrive when employees are well, children learn better when they are healthy, and public services are more effective when demand is managed through prevention. That is why we need a whole-society approach to health. We should work together to address the broader determinants of health, not least the socio-economic that the business community can help shape.

We are facing a challenging period, but with bold but compassionate leadership, strategic reform, and collective action, we can build a healthier, more prosperous Northern Ireland.

This will require difficult decisions, but the alternative - continued decline - is not an option. We must embrace change and invest in a system that is efficient, sustainable, and focused on prevention.

My commitment, as Health Minister, is to lead this transformation - not alone, but alongside colleagues in government, the business world, the community and voluntary sector and our world-class healthcare workforce.

NUMBER CRUNCHER

This month we meet Jan Parke who is Regional Financial Controller - Ulster Hotels with Harcourt Group. Jan is based in the iconic Titanic Hotel Belfast.

A Chartered Accountant, Jan joined Titanic Hotel Belfast in 2021 and is responsible for management of monthly accounts, cashflows and forecasts for all Ulster Hotels. Mentoring and developing the hotel finance teams in accounting and control best practices. Budgeting and other ad hoc projects as required.

What do you love about your job? That no day is ever the same, and the people I get to work with on a daily basis. In my role I get the opportunity to talk to staff across the hotels as well as work closely with head office. I also get to do a little more travelling as part of the wider group which is enjoyable especially now my children are that little bit older.

What do you love about the tourism/hospitality industry? Again, it would have to be the people. I have always worked in the industry, my dad was a chef, now retired, and my husband is the Executive Chef of our own family restaurant business, The Bryansburn Inn. I guess it is in my blood!

How/why did you get involved in the tourism/hospitality industry? My first job in the industry was actually a kitchen porter back when I was a teenager. I went from that to working out front as a waitress, all part time whilst I studied at school and then university. I took a step back from the industry to train as a chartered accountant when I left university and went into practice. It was only at the end of covid when the position of Financial Controller of the Titanic Hotel Belfast came up that I made the move back into the industry, albeit in a completely different role. I wasn't planning on leaving the accounting practice I was working in back then, but something just struck me as I happened to come across the job advert at that time. My grandfather was the Financial Controller of the Europa Hotel many years ago, my parents met working in a Hotel, I guess I just felt it was meant to be and I haven't looked back since.

What's your biggest challenge in your role? Time management. I want everything done now so when I see an improvement can be made, I put pressure on myself to achieve it which can sometimes be unrealistic.

What's your favourite thing to do outside of work? I like to cook when I get the time, music on and a glass of sauvignon blanc in hand – you can't beat it!



Jan Parke

Any hobbies? The executive team at Titanic Hotel Belfast are running the Belfast Marathon this year as a relay team so running is top of my hobbies at the minute.

Anything unusual you'd like to share about yourself? I am about to become an auntie for the first time!

What keeps you awake at night? My teenagers when they are still out! Work also keeps me up at times, especially during budget or audit season but I tend to not let it take over. One of my previous bosses gave me some good advice once, to keep a notepad and pen by the bed. That way when something did come to mind, I could jot it down and then forget about it until tomorrow.

Describe your ideal day off My ideal day off would have to start with Brunch with my family, it's usually the only time I can get us all together! I am very fortunate to live near the coast so a walk along Ballyholme Beach with our dog would have to be included. I would be lying if I said I didn't like to shop and dine out so the day would have to include a shopping trip to Belfast then dinner out with my husband. Given the hours we both work, those days off are few and far between, so we make the most of it when we can.

Jan is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast and a member of Chartered Accountants Ireland – FCA Qualified.



TITANIC HOTEL
BELFAST

Mentored to Mentor

CLAIRE BROWNE'S KPMG JOURNEY

KPMG's Claire Browne on becoming an Audit Partner and the future of the sector.



If ever there was an accountant's accountant, it's Claire Browne.

She has an infectious enthusiasm for the accountancy profession and an inbuilt understanding of the past, present and future of audit.

Now an Audit Partner at KPMG where she trained, Claire has risen through the ranks at pace during her time at the Belfast firm, as much for her accounting ability as for her capacity to connect with clients and colleagues alike.

That mix of talents means she has become a leader at the firm and within the profession, and someone who acts as a role model to many.

The latter point is one which is vitally important to Claire, someone who credits her own success to strong role models, most notably her mum.

"My mum worked extremely hard in senior sales roles for the Irish News and across the dental sector to provide a brilliant life for myself and my brother," Claire said. "That rubbed off on me and made me ambitious to forge a career for myself, one which my mum has been amazingly supportive of."

"Mum supported me right the way through school, university and at KPMG, acting as the driving force I needed to realise my ambitions. She drove me to careers fairs, to my summer internship at KPMG, to professional exams and has been a constant mentor and support since then."

Unsurprising then that Claire was ambitious. She set her heart on accountancy at the age of 14, taking that particular inspiration from a family friend and her own knack for numbers.

During her accountancy degree at Ulster University she got her first experience of KPMG during an internship.

"I loved it. I loved being on site meeting clients, I got engrossed in the culture, I was embraced by the team, I loved the audit work, I revelled in the social side, the corporate social responsibility work...it all aligned with me. I realised KPMG works with leading Northern Ireland businesses and I went back to university knowing that was the only firm I wanted to work for."

So Claire joined KPMG in 2011, immediately jumping in to work alongside clients both locally and further afield while doing her professional exams. Since becoming a Chartered Accountant, she has built her audit expertise and developed her leadership skills, taking a prominent role in major transformation projects and the rollout of technology

"If you can't see it, you can't be it, but with those female partners there to show me the way, I knew I could achieve my ambitions."

tools across the firm.

That leadership has extended to the wider accountancy sector, with Claire a member of the main committee of the Ulster Society of Chartered Accountants, a previous chair of the Young Professional Committee, and currently as convenor of the teaching, education and careers committee and member of the Education Board of Chartered Accountants Ireland.

She is also involved in the SistersIN programme which helps to enable, empower and develop female students in education to become leaders of tomorrow, something Claire sees as vitally important. Her own advice to those on the programme is remarkably simple, but powerful: "take what you do seriously, but have fun along the way".

Claire credits support from a number of leaders within KPMG for her own rise through the ranks - including John Poole and Johnny Hanna in Belfast - who entrusted her to run with instinctive ideas she had to improve practices and processes.

She also had support from other important female leaders including Dublin audit partner Emma O'Driscoll who acted as Claire's mentor when she was on maternity leave.

"Emma acted as the role model I needed and was able to show me I could be a mum and a leader," Claire said. "If you can't see it, you can't be it, but with those female partners there to show me the way, I knew I could achieve my ambitions."

That Claire was named partner in 2024 says a lot about the power of the appropriate support.

Now as a partner in the Audit team in Belfast, Claire is acting as a role model to others within the firm while also helping the sector as a whole progress.

That includes working with both local universities to ensure their accountancy

degrees evolve, including the development and implementation of a module on Microsoft Excel, a vital skill for accountants at all stages of their career.

The link to the education sector will help bolster the skills base in the accountancy profession and continue to build the talent within KPMG's own Audit team, something which Claire is close to given her active role in KPMG's graduate recruitment.

"I'm passionate about building skills and attracting and retaining talent. We have an extremely talented audit team here in Northern Ireland and will continue to build our skillset in the future."

That includes adopting new technology such as artificial intelligence (AI), with Claire rolling out the training for data automation tools which have helped to streamline audit process.

"AI tools allow us to focus on adding value to our service. All our audits are now online on a cloud platform so we can spend our time drilling into clients' data to assess trends and identify any opportunities. That is also valuable when it comes to attracting talent as our trainees and others get exposure to more interesting, analytical work."

Environmental, social and governance (ESG) is increasingly important in KPMG audit's work, so the team are upskilling to become sustainability assurance providers. That is helped by the expertise on offer from Russell Smyth, head of KPMG's Sustainable Futures, based here in Belfast and the deep ESG knowledge base within the firm. While these topics are top of the audit team's agenda, Claire says the key focus will be on maintaining expertise of the team.

"Our business is people," Claire said. "We have been successful in the past because we have built a team of highly talented people who are not just technically skilled but also able to deal effectively with clients."

"I wouldn't be here without the leaders who have helped guide me on my journey to date or the team members who have worked hard alongside me. I'm successful because the team is successful."

For KPMG as a whole, that mantra has certainly held true with the firm celebrating 50 years in Northern Ireland at the end of 2024, a mere marker on the road to future success, Claire said.

"I'm convinced the next 50 years will be just as successful, if not more."

WHAT DO THE NEW CHANGES TO INHERITANCE TAX MEAN FOR YOUR PENSION?

By Susan McNickle, Pension Specialist, Davy UK



In the Autumn Budget on October 30, 2024, Rachel Reeves announced several measures to reform inheritance tax, including bringing most unused pension funds within the value of a person's estate for Inheritance Tax (IHT) purposes from April 6, 2027. The Government explained that, in its view, pensions are increasingly used as a tax planning tool rather than for retirement funding.

For most individuals who will be relying on their pension to provide them and their spouse with an income upon retirement, the introduction of an IHT charge on death is unlikely to dramatically affect their plans. However, for individuals who do not require an income from their pension funds and have intended to pass them to future generations, it is a very different story.

Previous and current legislation (pre-April 2027): Before 2011, most individuals had to use their defined contribution pension fund to purchase an annuity at age 75, which could not be passed onto children. Before April 2015, funds that had not yet been used to provide retirement benefits could be passed tax-free if the individual died before 75, but funds already being used to provide benefits faced a 55% tax charge. Individuals could continue in taking an income beyond age 75 if they had sufficient 'secure income',

however upon death after 75 an effective tax charge of 82% would occur.

Post-2015, pensions became very tax efficient. Until the new changes take effect, individuals with defined contribution plans who die before 75 can pass their pension funds to beneficiaries free of both income and inheritance tax. However, on death after 75, any funds taken out of the pension tax wrapper will be subject to income tax at the beneficiaries' marginal rate.

Proposed changes (post-April 2027):

From April 6, 2027, it is proposed that pension funds will be included in the estate value for IHT. Exceptions include dependants' scheme pensions and charity lump sum death benefits. Transfers to a spouse or civil partner will be IHT-exempt but IHT will apply when passing to others (e.g., children, grandchildren). Executors will work with pension administrators to confirm fund values and use an HMRC calculator to apportion the available nil-rate band between pension and non-pension assets. The scheme will then pay the IHT directly to HMRC before paying beneficiaries.

Potential effects: For those affected by the changes, the tax payable on pension funds could be significant. The current nil-rate band allows £325,000 to be

passed tax-free, with a 40% IHT charge on amounts above this. The Residence Nil Rate Band (RNRB) provides an additional £175,000 if the family home is inherited by direct descendants. Estates over £2m may lose the RNRB, leading to higher effective IHT rates once pensions are included. Income tax also applies if the individual dies after age 75.

Potential actions to consider:

Review your 'expression of wish' forms and ensure they are written with the flexibility to allow trustees to pass funds directly to your children should you die before the 2027 changes, should your surviving spouse not require them.

It will become more attractive to spend your pension funds before other assets. You could also consider insuring against IHT liability, withdrawing tax-free cash, making regular gifts out of income, or donating pension funds to charity.

The imposition of IHT on pensions should not be seen as barrier to those still saving into their pension which remain the most tax efficient option for most people. However, the proposals mark a significant change in retirement and inheritance planning and it's important to review your financial plan considering your personal circumstances and objectives. Speak to your advisor should you have queries or wish to discuss how these changes impact you.

WARNING:

The information contained in this article is based on Davy's understanding of current tax legislation in the UK and the current HMRC interpretation thereof and is subject to change without notice. It is intended as a guide only and not as a substitute for professional advice. You should consult your tax adviser for the rules that apply in your individual circumstances.



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Alan Wallace, founder of Inspiring Belfast, is helping businesses connect with their audiences through the power of social media. With hands-on experience working with global brands, he has carved a niche in brand activations and emotional storytelling. Here he discusses the art of social connection.



Connecting Brands and People

Alan Wallace's approach to social media has helped him build a community of 175,000 loyal followers across multiple platforms. He attributes this achievement to his knack for "redefining what it means to engage audiences effectively".

At the heart of his success, Alan believes, is "an instinct for creating content that resonates". He explains, "Whether orchestrating viral campaigns, highlighting Belfast's vibrant culture, or leading the charge in TikTok expertise, my journey has been anything but conventional."

Alan's foray into social media began during his first year at university when he took on promotional roles. He worked for many brands including Sunblest and Moy Park and worked as a Red Bull Student Brand Manager. These experiences taught him how to effectively connect brands with people he says.

In 2018, he launched Inspiring Belfast as an experimental Instagram page, aiming to reach 10,000 followers. Initially a lifestyle page, it evolved into a testing ground for social media strategies. Over six years, the platform – across multiple channels – has grown to 175,000 followers, becoming a prominent voice for Belfast and a trusted resource for the businesses it collaborates with.

The evolution of Inspiring Belfast included street interviews and red-carpet videos, one of which went viral, amassing 65 million views across platforms. This success underscored the demand for authentic and impactful social media engagement. Alan has since focused on bridging the gap between brands and consumers, championing genuine human connection in business promotions. "In today's world, where people are less loyal to brands, staying relevant and connected is key," he says. "We're helping businesses achieve this, one creative campaign at a time." Alan explains that Inspiring Belfast combines creativity with

authenticity, earning it a reputation as one of Northern Ireland's most dynamic brand activation agencies.

Collaborating with names like Red Bull, Tourism Northern Ireland, and SSE Airtricity, Alan's campaigns deliver results that go beyond impressions, he says. His most notable achievement came in 2024 with a collaboration for Martin Phillips Carpets. "This creative campaign featured a playful red-carpet activation that resonated globally. The video went mega-viral, racking up 65 million views and becoming Ireland's most-watched brand video of the year.

"The Martin Phillips campaign was a game-changer. It showed that by combining creativity with emotional resonance, you can achieve extraordinary results that transcend platforms."

Another standout campaign was his partnership with EZ Living Interiors, where he interviewed locals on a sofa placed in Belfast's streets. "With a bit of creative planning, we created something memorable and impactful. Brands don't always need a detailed brief. Sometimes, they just need an open mind – that's where the magic happens."

When asked whether social media is essential for consumer-facing businesses, Alan is pragmatic: "There are businesses doing incredible things without it, and that's fine. But for those who want to position themselves on a different level, social media can help build presence and get the name out there," he explains.

"It's complementary to other methods, and the best part is, it's free. With some training and guidance, businesses can leverage platforms like TikTok to connect with their audiences more authentically."

Alan cites TikTok as a prime example. "Some local businesses have made over £1 million in sales just by utilising the platform. Its algorithm is incredibly powerful, and all age groups are now on TikTok. It's not just for young people anymore.

"Even Amazon is partnering with TikTok creators. It's a brilliant tool for creators and businesses alike. In Northern Ireland, we can be slow to adapt to new platforms, but those who get on board early reap the benefits."

In 2024, Alan was named NI Social Media Content Creator of the Year and recognised by the BBC as one of the Top 100 Creators in the UK. He was also appointed as the official TikTok ambassador for Ireland.

"These accolades are a testament to the incredible work we've done as a team," he says. "They drive me to keep exploring new ways to connect and innovate."

Looking to the future, his vision for Inspiring Belfast is ambitious. "Whether it's ground-breaking campaigns, partnerships with iconic brands, or fostering community, my focus remains on pushing boundaries and creating work that matters.

"For me, success isn't just about going viral," he concludes. "It's about telling stories that leave a lasting impression – on people, on brands, and on the industry as a whole."

"The Martin Phillips campaign was a game-changer. It showed that by combining creativity with emotional resonance, you can achieve extraordinary results that transcend platforms."

A full-page photograph of two men, Seamus McGuckin and Roisin Keenan, standing on a paved street in front of a row of light-colored, two-story houses. Seamus, on the left, is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie with small white dots. He has glasses and is smiling. Roisin, on the right, is wearing a dark blue suit over a light blue button-down shirt. He has a beard and is also smiling. The houses behind them have multiple windows, some of which are lit from within. The sky is overcast.

Collaborate to Innovate

Seamus McGuckin, AIB's head of Corporate NI and Roisin Keenan, head of Business Banking NI, have been working closely together to help local businesses grow for the future. We caught up with Seamus and Roisin to find out more about AIB's future focused approach.

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue shirt, stands with his arms crossed in front of a large, multi-story, light-colored building. The building has many windows and a traditional architectural style. The sky is overcast.

As head of Corporate NI, Seamus leads local engagement and early-stage new lending for corporate businesses and customers. Working closely with his counterparts across the AIB Group, Seamus brings unique cross border insights to customers and helps drive progress and growth in the Northern Ireland marketplace.

“One year into our respective new positions at the bank, Roisin and I have been working hard together to raise AIB’s profile as a partner to customers, supporting their growth ambitions,” explains Seamus. “This focus includes simplifying the route to market and shining a light on our full-service offering, from asset finance, lending and deposits to corporate finance and capital markets services.”

Having been with AIB for over 23 years, Roisin’s experience spans corporate banking, mortgages, retail banking and transformation change, making her ideally placed to lead AIB’s business banking team. Roisin oversees customer service delivery in Northern Ireland and explains how the bank’s collaborative approach supports innovation. “What sets AIB apart is our fully joined up offering. We adopt a collaborative approach to how we do business – between ourselves, across

teams and with customers on their own growth journeys,” says Roisin. Seamus adds that AIB’s operating structure is also unique, bringing customers the benefits of a North-South and East-West relationship given AIB’s presence in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, giving the team enhanced insights. “The Windsor Framework should offer Northern Ireland businesses a competitive advantage but is dependent on simplified cross border trade that can maximise the dual market access benefits. Northern Ireland now has the ingredients to attract higher levels of international investment and with our business and corporate teams working closely together we are here to help customers capitalise on that competitive advantage,” says Seamus.

INNOVATION IN ACTION

Roisin and Seamus both say that one of AIB’s stand-out attributes is its strong leadership and relationship management team, spread across Northern Ireland with proven sectoral expertise across industries including hospitality, housing, manufacturing and life sciences. One business that has developed a longstanding relationship with AIB and benefits from this collaborative

approach is Galgorm Collection. Last year, Galgorm Collection announced the acquisition of Galgorm Castle Estate and Roe Park Resort (recently rebranded to Roe Valley Resort) as part of a milestone £50million investment, supported by AIB. The combined spend, which includes acquisition costs and a multimillion-pound transformation plan for both properties, represents one of the region's

largest investments in Northern Ireland's hospitality sector.

"Galgorm Collection has grown to become the leading provider of luxury hospitality in the region. They see investments like this as a way to further enhance its offerings, creating even more opportunities for guests to enjoy unparalleled relaxation experiences,"

says Seamus. "We're proud to support our customers like Galgorm Collection through lending arrangements and finance structures to facilitate acquisition deals. We've seen the continued modernisation and innovation of businesses here as they fit out current premises to add new offerings and to become more environmentally friendly and efficient. Northern Ireland businesses have a keen eye when it comes to monitoring and analysing consumer trends, getting out ahead of expectations, and being future focused – helping set the region apart."

EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Roisin says that sustainability is one of these important expectations across sectors – from a consumer, partner and regulatory point of view. "We are all responsible for the world we live in and as a banking partner we are committed to empowering people to build a sustainable future," says Roisin. "Sustainability is a core pillar of our corporate strategy to the extent that we are targeting that at least 70% of new lending is green or transitional by 2030. We want to ensure a greener tomorrow by backing those building it today."

Seamus says that AIB provides customers with hands-on sustainability support. "One very popular service has been our 'Steps to Sustainability' hub, available on our website, aibni.co.uk. We have also partnered with NI Chamber for five years on the 'Successful Sustainability' programme, delivering expert advice and insights across a range of focus areas including ESG reporting, measurement and social value and we're looking forward to this year's series launching in March. "The reality of climate change and its impact on society and the economy has become undeniable and is everybody's business", adds Seamus. "Our focus is to highlight the opportunity the required energy transition presents, and the central role AIB continues to play in supporting customers on this journey to achieve the life they're after."

FUTURE FOCUSED

Looking ahead, Roisin and Seamus say AIB has several exciting developments on the horizon, building on significant investment across its enterprise services. "We have invested heavily in our business mobile app and we are further enhancing our SME lending journey for customers," says Roisin. "Our focus as a team is to seamlessly help new and existing bank customers achieve their ambitions, short term and long term. We are well placed to understand the challenges business leaders face and more importantly, the opportunities, helping serve the Northern Ireland economy as a whole."

"Sustainability is a core pillar of our corporate strategy to the extent that we are targeting that at least 70% of new lending is green or transitional by 2030."

MY AMBITION IS TO...

**Dermot Brogan, Communications
Specialist at Gray's.**

I work in a full-service creative agency based in the northwest. Before joining Gray's, I spent four years working as a journalist and producer at the BBC. The experience I gained there, particularly in such a fast-paced, high-pressure environment, has been invaluable in preparing me for my current role at Gray's, where I'm surrounded by an incredibly talented team and regularly working on exciting, important projects.

During my time at the BBC, I was involved in a variety of areas, dealing with high-stakes, rapidly evolving stories on a daily basis. It was an intense experience, but one that taught me to think on my feet and manage tight deadlines. I always appreciated how quickly things could change, and how, in the world of broadcasting, adaptability is key.

Prior to this, I graduated from Ulster

University with a Master's in journalism. This course equipped me with the skills needed to overcome the rigorous demands of a busy working environment while also sharpening both my writing skills and creativity. Both these traits were advanced further in my work as a journalist, and this, coupled with my training in agility and speed, have translated well into my current role. The environment in the bustling world of PR is just as dynamic as it was at the BBC, but now the focus is on the growth of our clients in sectors like energy and infrastructure, which presents an exciting new challenge.

One of the things I really value at Gray's is the nurturing, development-focused environment. Alongside my colleagues, I regularly refine my skills through the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and mentorship. The team here is all

about helping each other grow, and that's something that's been crucial for me in my career. We're encouraged to push our limits, to strive to be better, and that has really helped me develop professionally.

I'm continuously learning, which is one of the main reasons I love my job. Being surrounded by such a talented team makes this even more rewarding, as we all push each other to achieve great things. The camaraderie we share is another thing that I really enjoy. There's a real sense of collaboration, and everyone is willing to support one another.

In terms of the agency's growth, it's exciting to be part of such a highly ambitious business. The company is rapidly expanding, and it's fantastic to be part of that journey. The work we're doing is at the heart of some of the most important projects taking place throughout the UK and Ireland, and the growth we're experiencing reflects the impact we're making. I'm proud to be part of this journey and to contribute to the agency's success.

One of the things I love most about my role is the ability to shape the narrative around the projects we're working on. As a communications specialist, I get to craft stories that are not only interesting but also help our clients meet their objectives. It's a privilege to help create the narrative for important projects, especially when those projects have a real-world impact.

I also really value the trust our clients place in us. Being entrusted with the responsibility of communicating on behalf of someone else is something I take very seriously. I see our relationship with clients as a partnership, and I take pride in knowing that they rely on us to help them achieve their goals.

Another thing I'm incredibly proud of is Gray's commitment to our local community. We make a point of giving back, supporting a variety of charitable causes throughout the year. As someone who values the importance of community, it's great to work for a company that shares that sentiment and uses its position to make a positive impact.

Looking ahead, I'm incredibly excited about the future, both for Gray's and for my own career. The opportunities for growth here really are endless, and I look forward to being part of that continued success. Every day presents new challenges, and I'm eager to see where this journey takes me. I'm proud to work at a company that not only values its people but also strives to make a real difference in the industries we serve. I love what I do, and I'm grateful for the chance to be part of such a vibrant, forward-thinking team.

A portrait of Mark Hopkins, a middle-aged man with short brown hair and a light beard, smiling. He is wearing a dark blue blazer over a light blue striped shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

**Mark Hopkins, General
Manager, Dell Technologies
Ireland and Northern Ireland**

Unlocking the AI Opportunity Across NI

There is no doubt that businesses across Northern Ireland are recognising the transformative potential of AI.

From initiating pilot programmes across different areas of their business to employees testing AI tools within their daily workflow, organisations have been busy testing and learning how the technology can support business growth over the past 12 months.

AI-ENABLED INNOVATION

However, a new phase in the adoption cycle is now upon us this year. The era of trial and error in AI has moved on, with businesses of all sizes moving to strategically adopt GenAI to enhance productivity, efficiency and growth.

Harnessing the opportunities enabled by AI powered innovation will be an important part of driving growth and success for organisations in Northern Ireland in 2025 across a wide range of sectors, including healthcare, education and manufacturing. The convergence of AI with other emerging technologies such as quantum computing, 5G and 6G networks, and edge computing, will enable organisations in the public and private sectors to enhance efficiency and accelerate digital transformation.

TRANSFORMING HEALTHCARE WITH AI

In the healthcare sector, research by McKinsey shows that many organisations are already using GenAI to enhance

productivity. The technology is helping to automate and streamline administrative tasks such as patient documentation, resource management and clinical outreach, helping to free up valuable clinical resources.

Building a robust data infrastructure is a critical first step to ensure that healthcare organisations can fully support AI powered systems. Healthcare data is often fragmented and stored across different systems, so developing integrated and secure infrastructure for managing data is foundational before AI powered solutions can be deployed. Once the core infrastructure is in place, there are endless opportunities for harnessing the power of AI in healthcare.

For instance, many healthcare providers in Northern Ireland are leveraging AI to enhance analysis of patient data. The technology is helping clinicians to better identify early warning signs of chronic illnesses such as diabetes or heart disease. This not only enables timely interventions and personalised treatment plans but also improves patient outcomes.

AI agents also look set to play an increasingly important role in enhancing productivity in healthcare and beyond. These new software systems are designed to plan, make decisions and execute actions autonomously. Virtual health agents will be capable of managing complex patient enquiries from booking appointments to billing and more.

ADVANCING EDUCATION AND RESEARCH WITH AI

In higher education, students, researchers and educators across Northern Ireland will directly benefit from the power of AI, as third level institutes across the region advance these innovative capabilities.

Combining AI and high-performance computing (HPC) technologies is supporting the development of more advanced research capabilities across a range of scientific fields including cybersecurity, climate modelling and pharmaceuticals. Enabling researchers

to develop complex, bespoke AI models for the analysis of large data sets can boost both the accuracy and efficiency of research.

Dell has been working in collaboration with the third level sector in Northern Ireland to help harness the power of AI to advance cutting-edge research. By harnessing latest advancements in HPC, we can provide researchers with the high-performance computing capabilities necessary to manage billions of data inputs and gain real-time insights from that data.

The PC is the most important personal productivity device of our time and at Dell we have driven PC innovation for the past 40 years. But today, PCs are being transformed by AI. For students, today's AI powered PCs can help to enhance learning and promote better educational outcomes. With new devices across Dell, we're enabling users to stay productive longer and handle more intense workloads.

Equipped with embedded AI, these devices are automating routine tasks, such as transcribing lectures and organising emails, allowing students to focus on gaining a deeper understanding of concepts and course material.

BUILDING AN AI-READY WORKFORCE

As the AI transformation accelerates, every business and organisation will need to prioritise the upskilling of

their employees and putting in place dedicated workforce transformation plans to stay competitive.

Findings from Dell's Innovation Catalysts Study show that businesses are already making progress on this journey. six in 10 organisations are now training or upskilling their employees to use AI.

Embracing workforce transformation as part of a broad innovation strategy designed around modern, advanced infrastructure, can enable organisations to fully harness the potential of AI for growth and productivity.

SEIZING NORTHERN IRELAND'S AI OPPORTUNITY

As business leaders in Northern Ireland navigate the challenges that lie ahead, advancing AI powered innovation will be key to positioning their organisations for future success. At Dell, we're proud to support private and public organisations across Northern Ireland to embrace the power of AI and other emerging technologies to transform at speed. Through the Dell AI factory, our team of AI experts, and industry-leading compute and storage capabilities, we're helping to shape the future of AI in Northern Ireland and beyond.

The time is now for businesses across Northern Ireland to seize the AI opportunity and unlock the significant economic and societal opportunities ahead.



“Building a robust data infrastructure is a critical first step to ensure that healthcare organisations can fully support AI powered systems.”



I Would Be Proud For My Children To Work With Gilbert-Ash

**Aparna Chavan on making her mark as a project planner
with award-winning company.**

A project planner has spoken of her pride at being able to take her children to view projects she has worked on with an award-winning construction and fit out company.

Aparna Chavan joined Gilbert-Ash six years ago after being drawn to the company by its rich heritage of standout projects which include the National Portrait Gallery, Cambridge Central Mosque, The Royal College of Music and The Stirling Prize-winning Everyman Theatre.

Proud of its heritage as a leading Northern Ireland construction and fit out company, Gilbert-Ash works in 44 countries around the world, excelling across several different sectors.

It is currently working on projects including the refurbishment of Theatr Clwyd in Flint, Wales and a major refurbishment of Tate Liverpool. In Dublin, the company is currently constructing two Premier Inn hotels and a citizenM hotel.

Speaking ahead of Women in Construction Week in March, Aparna said: "As a project planner I can be involved with projects right from start to finish and it is fascinating to be working alongside some of the best people in the industry.

"At the tender programme stage, I work alongside everyone who is leading the project and this is my favourite part of the process.

"It is a remarkable feeling to be able to walk past a completed project with my children and be able to tell them that I was involved at every stage of its delivery.

"As a female working in construction, I feel very happy at Gilbert-Ash. There is a real family atmosphere, and gender doesn't come into the equation when it comes to hiring – it is always based on getting the right person for the job."

Gilbert-Ash is firmly focused on promoting an inclusive and diverse workplace where everyone's opinions are heard and valued.

Around 23% of Gilbert-Ash's workforce are female, while

women make up 28% of the senior management team and around 14% work in site management positions.

This compares favourably with the industry average of 15% females and 16% when it comes to senior management.

However, Gilbert-Ash realises more work needs to be done to promote the construction industry to women. To this end, it works very closely with organisations such as Women'stec and the Construction Industry Training Board NI (CITB NI).

Aparna was speaking as Gilbert-Ash continues its Make Your Mark campaign, aimed at attracting the best people in the industry to join the company.

The campaign also seeks to celebrate Gilbert-Ash's people for the difference they are making on stand-out projects for the contractor.

The company is riding high at the minute and last year, one of its recent projects, the refurbishment of the National Portrait Gallery, was shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize. It's the fifth time one of the firm's projects has made the prestigious final.

In addition to the National Portrait Gallery in 2024, the Lyric Theatre was shortlisted in 2012, the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre in 2013 and Cambridge Central Mosque in 2021. The Everyman Theatre won the coveted award in 2014. One of Aparna's recent projects was the 180-bedroom hub by Premier Inn at Clerkenwell London. The works saw the team transform a multi-storey carpark into a four-star hotel and six-storey office building.

But it's a project that will also be remembered for the high levels of

community engagement which saw Gilbert-Ash carry out complimentary improvement works to the interior and exterior of the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering.

The team even joined Sir Michael Palin to go carol singing to raise funds for the 100-year-old building and the outstanding work it does to transform the lives of young people who stammer. In a video message to Gilbert-Ash, Sir Michael Palin paid tribute to the work the company carried out at the centre. He said: "What a gift this relationship has been to the Michael Palin Centre. You can be assured that everything you have done, and continue to do, will transform the lives of children who stammer. Thank you."

Aparna said: "I would be very proud if my children decided to work with Gilbert-Ash one day. It is a very people-focussed company, and you are given everything you need to progress your career.

"When I was preparing for my job interview, I researched some of the projects they have been involved in, and their portfolio is really impressive. You get opportunities to work on projects which make a real difference and that's not something you get everywhere else.

"Now I have been here for six years, and I really feel part of something special. There is a family feel about Gilbert-Ash with everyone looking out for each other, sharing knowledge and helping one another.

"For anyone starting their career in construction or wanting to make a move, I would certainly recommend Gilbert-Ash. There is such a wide variety of roles and lots of opportunities for further training and career development."

"As a female working in construction, I feel very happy at Gilbert-Ash. There is a real family atmosphere, and gender doesn't come into the equation when it comes to hiring – it is always based on getting the right person for the job."

Manfreight: Leading the Charge in Smart, Sustainable Logistics



Headquartered in Portadown and with strategically located sites throughout Ireland and the UK, Manfreight is a leading logistics, supply chain, and transport business.

Manfreight's journey from a modest transport operation to a leader in logistics and supply chain solutions is a story of vision, resilience, and adaptation.

Founded over 50 years ago by Chris Slowey Senior, the company has grown into a key player in the movement of temperature-controlled, dry freight, and bulk goods, servicing industries across the UK, Ireland, and mainland Europe.

Today, Manfreight is setting new standards in sustainable logistics, technological innovation, and supply chain efficiency.

PUSHING BOUNDARIES IN TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED LOGISTICS

A key milestone is the opening of the state-of-the-art 50,000 sq. Ft.

Temperature-Regulated Facility at Belfast Harbour, a groundbreaking addition that has achieved the prestigious BRCGS AA* Accreditation. This facility exemplifies Manfreight's commitment to quality, safety, and innovation in temperature-controlled logistics, elevating their capacity to serve the FMCG, agri-food, pharmaceutical, parcel, and dry freight industries with unmatched precision and reliability.

Designed to meet BREEAM Excellence Standards, the award-winning facility operates with cutting-edge refrigeration technology that ensures precise temperature control while keeping energy consumption low. Ideally located, it's positioned to connect seamlessly with shipping routes, making supply chains stronger, faster, and more resilient.

A GREEN FUTURE: MANFREIGHT'S SUSTAINABILITY DRIVE

For Manfreight, sustainability is a core business principle. The company has already cut its carbon footprint by 14% and, by 2030, the Belfast facility is set to be completely carbon neutral. Solar panels now provide 20% of the facility's power, and an innovative water-cooled refrigeration system is helping to eliminate harmful F-gases.

Working alongside Powertech Refrigeration, Manfreight has introduced an ammonia-based cooling system with zero global warming potential (GWP). A heat recovery system captures excess energy and repurposes it for heating, further reducing waste and reinforcing the company's commitment to responsible logistics.





SMARTER LOGISTICS THROUGH AI AND AUTOMATION

Sustainability is only one piece of the puzzle. Manfreight is also pushing the boundaries of innovation, making logistics smarter and more efficient. The Belfast facility integrates AI and automation to optimise operations, featuring electric tugs, forklifts, and powered pallet trucks all of which reduce emissions and improve productivity.

Looking ahead to 2025, Manfreight is gearing up for a game-changing project in partnership with BT: The DSIT 5G Innovation Initiative. The company will introduce AI-powered pallet recognition technology through Belfast Harbour's private 5G network, combining advanced CCTV systems with machine learning to provide real-time insights into warehouse operations. This is the future of logistics - smarter, safer, and more connected than ever before.

A FAMILY BUSINESS WITH BIG AMBITIONS

Manfreight's success story is deeply rooted in its family values. Established in 1973 by Chris Slowey Senior, the company started as a one-truck operation. Over the decades, it has grown into an industry leader, with a fleet of 320 trucks, 540 trailers, and over 400 employees.

When Chris Slowey Junior took over as Managing Director in 2010 after his father's untimely death, he brought fresh ideas and a drive to modernise and grow

“Designed to meet BREEAM Excellence Standards, the award-winning facility operates with cutting-edge refrigeration technology that ensures precise temperature control while keeping energy consumption low. Ideally located, it's positioned to connect seamlessly with shipping routes, making supply chains stronger, faster, and more resilient.”

the business. The company transitioned from a one-truck, one-driver model to a more flexible, scalable logistics network powered by advanced fleet management systems.

Despite economic challenges and industry disruptions, Manfreight has remained agile; committed to providing quality service, and always ahead of the curve.

THE ROAD AHEAD: WHAT'S NEXT FOR MANFREIGHT?

The launch of the Belfast facility is just the beginning. The business has big plans for the future, with further investments in smart logistics, automation, and AI-driven efficiencies on the horizon.

The company's dedication hasn't gone unnoticed. Recent industry accolades include the Excellence in Warehousing Award and the Green Supply Chain Excellence Award at the 2025 Irish Transport & Logistics Awards, as well as the Innovation Award at the 2024 FSB NI Awards. These honours recognise Manfreight's role as a trailblazer in modern logistics.

With a clear strategy for growth and a strong commitment to sustainability, Manfreight isn't just adapting to change - it's driving it. Manfreight is proving that the future of logistics is both smart and sustainable through its careful balance of innovation, environmental responsibility, and customer-focused service.



Embracing Community, Carbon Zero, and Economic Prosperity

Belfast Harbour recently launched its 2025-2029 Strategy, with the overarching goal to 'Advance Regional Prosperity'. We speak with Belfast Harbour Commissioners' Chair, Dr. Theresa Donaldson, about the substantial £313m investment and what it means for the local economy.

Belfast Harbour has unveiled an ambitious new strategy, pledging £313 million in investment further positioning itself as a major driver of regional economic growth. Its launch follows a decade in which the Harbour invested over £374 million in transformative capital projects.

As it handles 70% of Northern Ireland's seaborne trade, ensuring essential goods and services reach the people who rely on them, the investment by Belfast Harbour is crucial.

"Belfast Harbour has a long history of delivering positive change through investment in the ongoing development of the port and Harbour Estate for the benefit of our customers, tenants, and the wider community," Chair of Belfast Harbour, Dr. Theresa Donaldson, begins. "Our 2025-29 strategy aims to continue this transformation, further developing Belfast Harbour and boosting prosperity for the region. By investing £313 million, we will build on our strengths as the region's leading port and a vital economic hub."

A significant £208 million of this investment is earmarked for port improvements, with several key developments set to enhance resilience, efficiency, and sustainability.

"We have long and valued relationships with our port customers, and we are dedicated to providing them with first-rate services and facilities. We listen carefully to their feedback, and the investments planned aim to make us an even more resilient and competitive port," Dr. Donaldson explains.

Central to this is Belfast Harbour's largest-ever single investment: £90 million for a new deepwater quay.

"This facility will allow us to host more cruise visitors and welcome some of the largest cruise ships in the world," Dr. Donaldson explains. "With additional works, it will also enable us to facilitate the deployment of next-generation floating offshore wind farms."

Belfast Harbour has already played a significant role in offshore wind development. "Between 2013 and 2018, Belfast Harbour's facility enabled the delivery of 66% of the offshore wind projects developed in UK waters," Dr. Donaldson says. "By investing in a new deepwater quay, we aim to expand our offshore wind business and develop a brand-new terminal to service next-generation floating turbines by 2030."

With the UK and Ireland setting ambitious offshore wind energy targets, Belfast Harbour is positioning itself at the forefront of this industry.

"There are huge potential benefits for the local supply chain and job creation. With 30 offshore wind farms planned within a 200km range of Belfast, the opportunity is immense.

“The wind farms planned for UK and Irish waters over the next decade will be the power stations of the future. Our expertise, investments, and infrastructure, alongside NI’s existing clean energy and advanced manufacturing ecosystem, will support the development of a strong local supply chain. We believe this will be viewed favourably when developers are making future decisions and considering construction and deployment options for their projects.”

She adds, “Achieving carbon neutrality is not just a goal but a guiding principle influencing all our actions. We are on track to become the first net zero port operator on these islands.”

“We aim to be net zero in our direct operations by the end of 2030, and we expect to achieve this ahead of schedule. We also promote sustainable practices throughout our maritime and landside operations and work with suppliers who share our environmental values.”

In comparative terms, Belfast Harbour is the fifth busiest port in the UK and the second busiest on the island of Ireland, and the strategy aims to solidify its market-leading position. Dr. Donaldson adds, “Investing in clean tech and new infrastructure will ensure an even more resilient and competitive port. We have earmarked £60 million for port maintenance, repairs, and upgrades, while £58 million will be spent on port development and infrastructure.”

This investment will deliver new sustainably powered cranes, the rollout of private 5G networks, and automation projects, alongside logistics facilities designed to set new standards for sustainability, safety, and flexibility.

Beyond core port functions, £105 million

of the strategy’s investment is allocated to further developing the Harbour Estate and waterfront.

“The £60 million City Quays 5 development will include Grade A offices, ground-floor retail, an exhibition area, and a rooftop hospitality venue,” Dr. Donaldson says. “This year, we will also be opening City Quays Gardens, a new green space for everyone in the city to enjoy.”

Housing and community development are also key priorities. “We support the Belfast Agenda’s goal of 3,500 new homes by 2035. With a young, growing population and Belfast’s status as a thriving university city, we recognise the need for a diverse residential portfolio,” she notes.

By the end of 2029, Belfast Harbour aims to deliver 325 new homes, including 69 affordable homes, with a pipeline for at least 3,000 more. And as more people live and thrive in the area, transport links will be elevated. “We will further improve links to the city centre and public transport while developing paths to encourage walking and cycling. We will also introduce the island’s first autonomous vehicle to Belfast Harbour, better connecting the estate to Titanic Quarter, Odyssey, and the wider city.”

Dr. Donaldson adds that feedback from the Harbour community and nearby residents will be crucial to developments “to ensure our plans align with their needs.” To support this, Belfast Harbour is working with the University of Ulster, the Housing Executive, and other experts on research to inform best practice urban development. “This year, we are working with stakeholders to really understand what makes successful neighbourhoods. We will use these findings to inform how we develop housing and meet the needs of new communities in Belfast Harbour Estate.”

Dr. Donaldson is quick to point out that the future wouldn’t be viable without honouring the past. Preserving Belfast Harbour’s iconic heritage is key. “We also want to blend our industrial past with modern designs to create a unique sense of place.”

She highlights the importance of legislative changes that could enable even greater transformation. “Legislation to enable the reclassification of our accounting status by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and extended commercial powers – currently being considered by the Infrastructure Minister – would allow us to fully realise our ambition to create flourishing new neighbourhoods.”

As well as partnerships, collaboration, and vibrant communities, innovation also remains central to Belfast Harbour’s future vision. “The Harbour Estate is already home to groundbreaking firms like Artemis, Catagen, and Ionic Technologies, and our strategy aims to build on this,” Dr. Donaldson says. “We know that clean tech offers new opportunities and can create new revenue streams.”

The strategy will also see Belfast Harbour increase collaboration with start-ups, established firms, and universities. “We will also partner with government and industry, including Innovation City Belfast. Together, we will create digital and clean energy solutions for the maritime and transport sectors, ensuring we stay ahead in a fast-changing world.”

Through ambitious investment, innovative development, and with net zero at its heart, Belfast Harbour’s new strategy will help it set a benchmark for economic growth and environmental leadership in Northern Ireland and beyond.



“We aim to be net zero in our direct operations by the end of 2030, and we expect to achieve this ahead of schedule.”

Gareth Hagan, CEO, OCO Global.

Navigating An Ever-Changing World

Have we ever seen a decade like that we've just lived through in terms of its impact on business? Brexit, a global pandemic, rampant inflation, and just when it looked like we were moving into calmer waters, we have had a whirlwind start to the Trump presidency with the word 'tariffs' entering the public consciousness like never before.

OCO Global, a Belfast headquartered advisory firm, has been operating in the middle of this ever-changing world of global trade and investment for almost 25 years. Whilst the last decade has been eventful, for all of its history, OCO has carved out a reputation as a one-stop shop for both government and private sector clients, looking to seek out and win business opportunities in international markets. And today, with a global staff of 150 consultants, located in key global economic centres such as London, Dubai, New York, Paris and Frankfurt, the company is looking confidently into the future whatever that may bring.

The global economy never stands still, and ultimately change creates opportunities for our business. Despite there being more data and information available than ever before, our clients trust us to help them think through challenges, bring local expertise through our market teams, and cut through the noise. This was certainly the case in the aftermath of Covid, where we worked extensively with our government clients on recovery plans, and targeting investment from the industries that thrived and emerged stronger from the pandemic. We also worked with dozens of companies, including many here in Northern Ireland, to help them adjust supply chains and reach new markets for their products and services. Of all of the things that we do, nothing is more satisfying than helping a local company to compete and grow their business in an international market.

Companies in Northern Ireland offer fantastic products and services, and long gone are the days when selling to the local UK and Ireland markets was

often the extent of the ambition. We're supporting companies in accessing market opportunities in the US and Europe, as well as fast-growing markets in the Middle East. And I truly believe that the unique position we find ourselves in with regard our trading arrangements post-Brexit, is something that we can leverage further.

The company has continued to invest in recent years. We're in the business of connecting our clients with opportunities across the world, and giving them the information to make good decisions. We've created technology solutions that make the experience of finding out more about a market, identifying a potential buyer, and connecting with like-minded and complimentary businesses a digital experience through our CONNECT platform. And we've entered into a strategic relationship with IBM to embed AI into much of what we do, allowing us to analyse data faster and allowing us to spend more time delivering outcomes for clients.

Our investment has also taken us into several new markets. OCO historically has had its roots in Europe and the US, which have historically been the priority markets for local exporters. However, having operated in Dubai and more recently opened an office in Riyadh, OCO has seen significant business growth in the Middle East. MENA and Saudi in particular, have been real growth markets for us. Economic development and attracting international investment are at the very top of the national agenda there, and with a track record of doing that for 20+ years, our brand has landed very well in those markets.

The opportunities that are being created for exporters there through infrastructure and capital investment are huge. We recently ran a pioneering 'Trade Corridors' programme for UK exporters into Saudi and will step up that activity this year.

We're a people business, and the value of everything we do resides in our immensely talented and diverse global teams. The most satisfying part of the job is seeing the results they deliver for clients, and the positive feedback we receive. It also ensures that clients trust us and come back for more! I'd say that what makes OCO unique is that our teams wherever they are in the world are connected and this 'one team' model is hugely valued by clients. As we've expanded, increased diversity has brought so much benefit to our business – languages, appreciation of local economies and business cultures, and relationships across the world. And it doesn't stop there; it's also made us a more curious business about how we can re-apply things that have worked somewhere in the world and explore things like technology and how it can make the world a smaller place.

In a growing global business, OCO continues to invest in Belfast as its global centre of excellence, working with all of its global teams. That's one of the cool parts of the job: walking into Belfast and seeing the teams working with colleagues in Frankfurt or Riyadh. And even hearing Northern Ireland accents as I travel around our global offices!

“We're a people business, and the value of everything we do resides in our immensely talented and diverse global teams.”

NEW
APPOINTMENTS
IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

CHRIS JARVIS

Area Sales Manager NI, Lauralu



ED HOOK

Sales Director UK & Ireland, Greiner Packaging



NIAMH MCGONAGLE

Policy & Public Affairs Advisor, NI Chamber



NIAL PARFIT

Non-Executive Director, Chartered Institute of Marketing



TOM BOYD

Head of Philanthropy & Corporate Relationships, Little Heroes



LUCY MITCHELL

Commercial & Membership Director, Ulster Farmers Union



PATRICIA BURNS

Non-Executive Director, ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall & Ulster Hall



JENNY DEVINE

Creative Director, Gray's Communications





Grant Thornton Announces Record Number of Partner Appointments

Grant Thornton has announced the appointment of 15 new partners across its audit, tax and advisory areas across the island of Ireland, with four of the appointments made at its Belfast office.

These appointments bring the number of partners appointed in the past year to 23 as the firm continues its growth trajectory.

In the Belfast office, Áine Logan and Paul Prenter are new advisory partners, with Bronagh Bourke becoming audit partner and Mark Bradley appointed as tax partners.

These latest appointments follow Grant Thornton's recent transformational agreement to combine the advisory and tax arms of the business with its counterparts in the US, creating a new multinational platform providing audit, advisory and tax services to a growing international client base.

Commenting on the appointments, Steve Tennant, Grant Thornton, said: "Today's announcement is recognition of the exceptional talent within our firm and the momentum behind our groundbreaking new multinational platform. It also highlights the opportunities at Grant Thornton as we cater to a growing international client base as the first fully integrated US-Ireland professional services firm.

"Our new partners strengthen our expertise in key industries like financial services, technology and healthcare. By combining local excellence with global capabilities and advanced technology, we're setting a new standard in cross-border professional services."

Catalyst Appoints Patrick McIlveen as New Head of Entrepreneurship

Catalyst has announced the appointment of Patrick McIlveen as its new head of Entrepreneurship, with responsibility for overseeing its entrepreneurship support programmes.

Patrick has held various roles at Catalyst over the past five years, joining as manager of a digital hub project before moving to become programme associate for its Co-Founders programme and then an innovation lead in Catalyst's Open Innovation team.

His career includes being a co-founder of a property technology-focused start-up operating in the London market and he is currently a Department of Education appointed director at the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

In his new role Patrick will be responsible for overseeing the successful delivery of programmes such as Hello Possible, Basecamp Boston, and INVENT, which are designed to create opportunities for new entrepreneurs and support the rapid scaling of start-ups.

Steve Orr, chief executive of Catalyst said:

"I'm really pleased to have Patrick taking up the role of head of Entrepreneurship. He brings a great understanding of Catalyst's programmes and a passion for making entrepreneurship accessible to everyone in Northern Ireland, no matter their background. He has also been an entrepreneur himself, so he has a great understanding of some of the challenges the founders of innovative companies in our ecosystem face on a daily basis."

Patrick McIlveen, head of Entrepreneurship at Catalyst said:

"Catalyst's vision is 'opportunity for all from world-leading innovation', and I'm excited to drive that forward by strengthening the entrepreneurship landscape in Northern Ireland. Founders at all stages face real challenges, and my focus is on ensuring they have the right support, networks, and resources to build ambitious, globally competitive businesses – while making entrepreneurship accessible to all."



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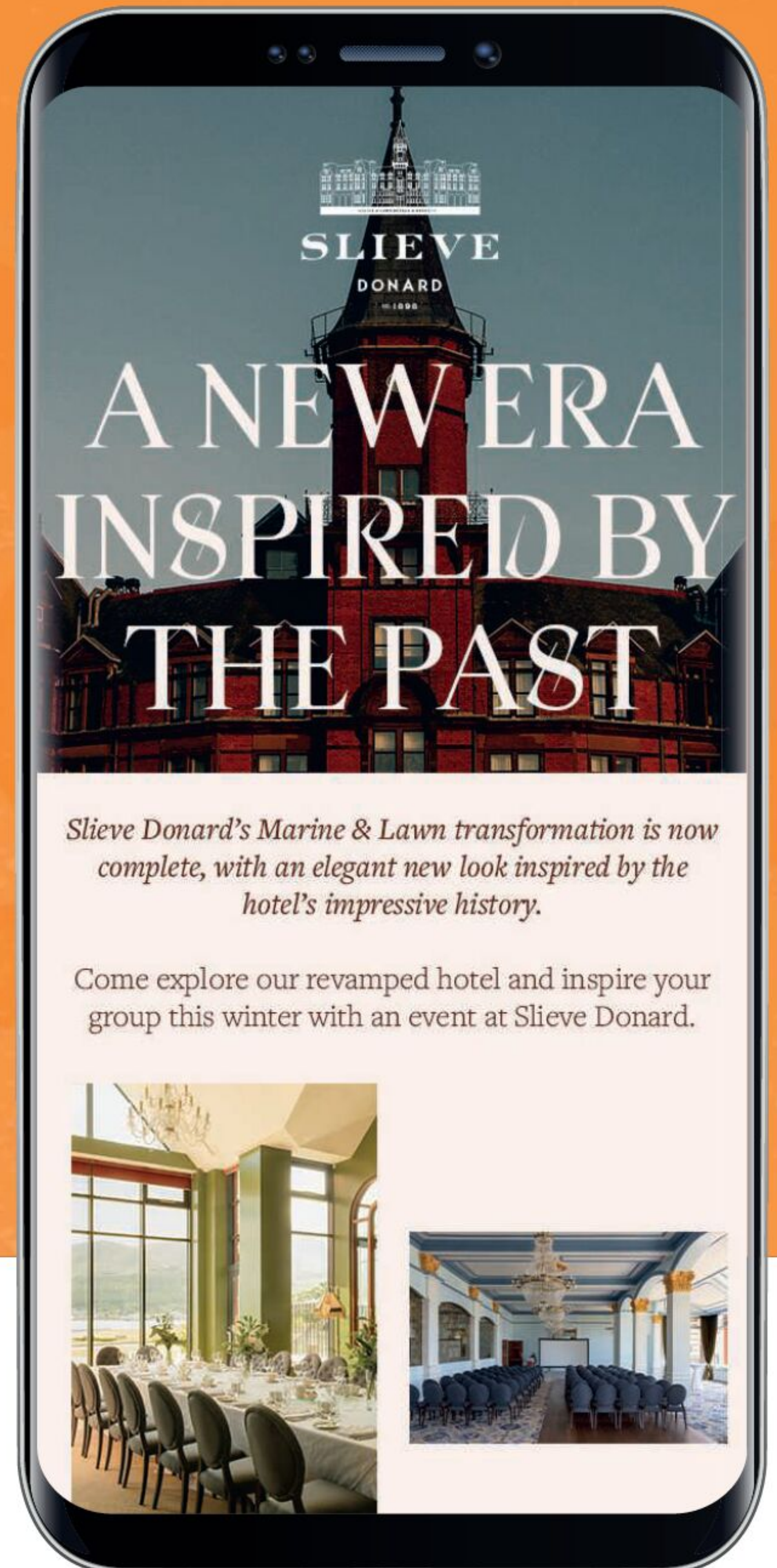
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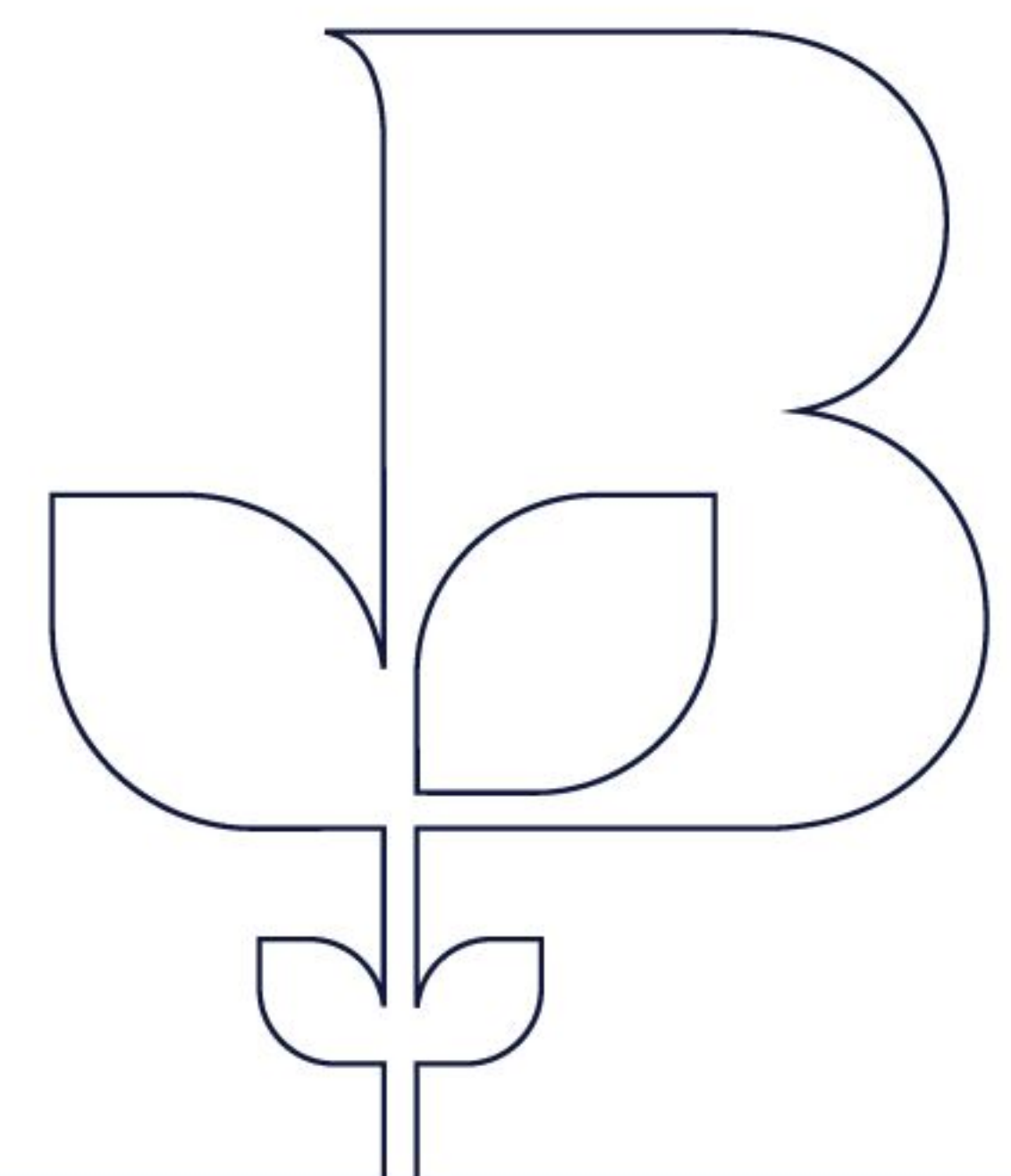


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Columnist

Jonny Kelly

Consulting Director, The Foundation

Vision in a Volatile World

As the world gets smaller and ambitions get bigger, competing on the global stage has never been more achievable nor more daunting. The pace of change and unpredictability of events present a dynamic set of challenges for businesses and leaders to navigate their path to growth.

The U.S. Army War College introduced a new concept to describe the world after the Cold War in the 1990s. It describes a reality which is Volatile / Uncertain / Complex / Ambiguous...VUCA.

It has since been used in leadership training and business to describe a turbulent environment which in recent memory has included financial crashes, pandemics, wars, a cost-of-living crisis and the constant march of technological advancement.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT VUCA?

Like it or not VUCA is our operating environment, always has been and always will. Why is it important to acknowledge it, and what can you do about it?

There is much beyond our control, but we need to be aware that the underlying constant is change, and we need to be capable of thriving within it.

Our business leaders must be equipped to successfully navigate through changing tides and turbulent waters. Volatility needs stability, uncertainty needs predictability,

complexity requires simplification and ambiguity requires clarity. Easier said than done right?

Business leaders of today and tomorrow require a set of skills that drive standards and cultures which are agile, transparent, resilient, and entrepreneurial. They must have the ability to anticipate and pivot, walk in the shoes of their customers and their team, and react to adversity seeing the positive in all situations. Amor fati.

The thread that ties these qualities and attributes together is vision. A clear and compelling picture of the intended future. However, vision holds little value without communication. Leaders must possess the means to establish their vision of the future, but it is also critical that they communicate it effectively to the team and the customers that will bring to life.

All too often the vision fails to make it out of the CEO's head or away from the boardroom table. There is a strategy for everything except communicating the strategy.

HOW DO WE PREVENT THAT FROM HAPPENING? HOW DO WE GIVE A VISION THE BEST CHANCE OF BECOMING REAL?

After two decades of working in brand strategy and communications we have observed some distinct qualities or mind-sets of 'vision-led' businesses. They are foundational traits underpinned by many elements, but useful as reminders to ask the questions and inform the actions.

First is Clarity. Have you got a clear picture of where you want to go with a rationale to support it? Do you have a road map, milestones and indicators to help track your journey?

The second element is Reality. Are the mechanisms in place to keep your finger on the pulse? What is your current position in your market or the minds of your customers? How healthy is the culture in the business? Are you communicating your vision clearly to all stakeholders?

Finally there is Traction, a relentless focus on ensuring that time, energy and budget are being spent on actions that gain momentum towards the future. This requires that the business never loses sight of the strategic objectives set out in the vision and all activities are intentionally aligned to that end.

Clarity, Reality and Traction provide the rails and governance to guide a business towards its vision. They ask the important questions to challenge thinking and steer strategies; Is our vision clear (to all stakeholders)? Have we got a real and accurate picture of our current position?

Are we investing our energy and resources in activities?

With the right mindset a VUCA world is a very exciting place to live and work. It presents challenges, but also brings opportunity. As leaders it is our challenge to see our way through it, sharing our vision effectively with the people we need to bring on the journey.

"In the land of the blind..."

Andrew Turner
Executive Chef

SEA BUCKTHORN, GINGER & OATS

Ingredients for gel:

1lt Sea Buckthorn Puree
2lt Water
300g Sugar
50g Agar Agar
15 Leaves Bronze Leaf Gelatine

Ingredients for oat crumb:

250g Salted Butter
250g Sugar
250g Flour
200g Rolled Oats

For serving:

Stem ginger syrup
Slices of Stem ginger
Coriander cress

This is a refreshing little palate cleanser and we serve it after our treatments here at the Old Inn, you can change the flavours to suit if you like, but we like the feel of this one with the forest behind the treatment rooms.

For the gel:

1. Soak the Gelatine in cold water until it blooms, whisk the sugar and agar agar into the cold water and bring to a vigorous boil, whisk in the sea buckthorn puree bring back to the boil and allow to set.
2. When cold and set puree until smooth and fill a foam gun, charge with three gases.
3. Serve at room temperature.

For the oat crumb:

1. Rub all of the ingredients together to form a crumb.
2. Bake at 160°C for 25-30mins until golden allow to cool.

To Serve:

When everything is cool and at room temperature, scatter a little of the crumb in the bottom of a bowl, drizzle a little stem ginger syrup over the crumb and then cover with the buckthorn gel from the gun, arrange a few larger crumbs on top and a few slices of stem ginger, finish with a little coriander cress.



Students Take Up the Challenge and Secure £6,000 for Charities

Students from three schools have won a total of £6,000 for three local charities as part of a charity challenge organised by Ulster Carpets and the John Wilson Memorial Trust.

St John the Baptist's College won the top prize of £5,000 for Barnardo's Pharos, a service supporting children, young people and their families affected by parental substance abuse. As part of the challenge, Markethill High School secured £500 for Paws and People while St Ronan's College, Lurgan won £500 for their local Men's Shed.

To secure the vital funding for the three charities, students from each school had to research the charity before making a presentation to trustees that outlined why their chosen charity deserved funding.

The School Charity Challenge was organised by The John Wilson Memorial Trust, which was set up in memory of the late John Wilson, son of Ulster Carpets founder, George Walter Wilson, and is dedicated to supporting local community projects.

Dr John Wilson, chairman of Ulster Carpets and trustee of the John Wilson Memorial Trust, commented, "Congratulations to all the students for their hard work and enthusiasm which has helped three deserving charities."

"We created the Charity Challenge as a way to connect pupils with their local community and to prove they can make a difference. We know the money they helped to secure will benefit their local communities."

www.johnwilsontrust.com



Mick Cairns and Colm Skinnell from the Men's Shed in Lurgan with Matthew Young and Blathnaid Doran from St Ronan's College, Lurgan. A presentation by the two students helped secure £500 for the local organisation.



Miley Cummins and Grace Douglas from Markethill High School who secured £500 for Paws and People as part of the School Charity Challenge. Included in the picture are trustees from the John Wilson Memorial Trust.

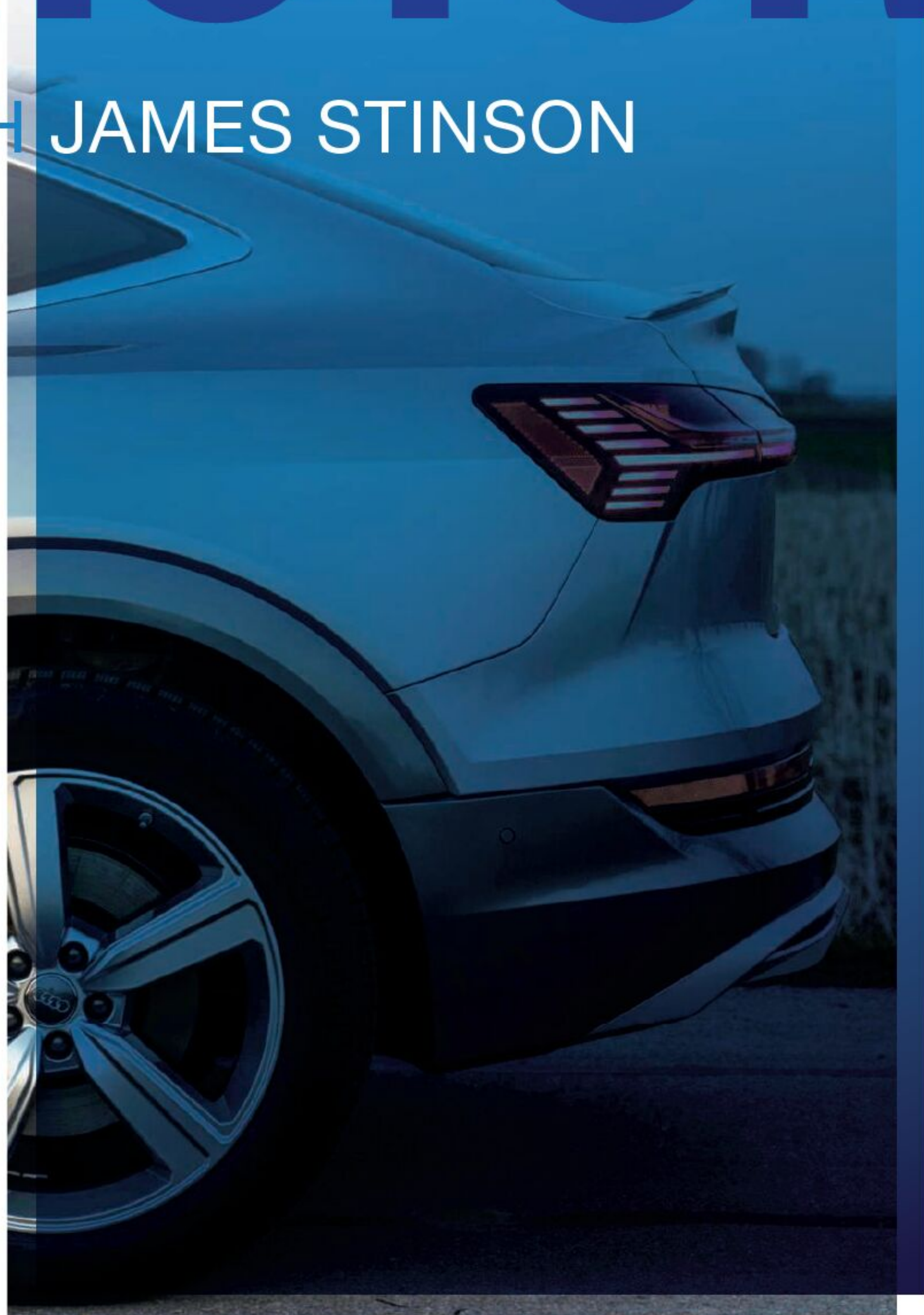
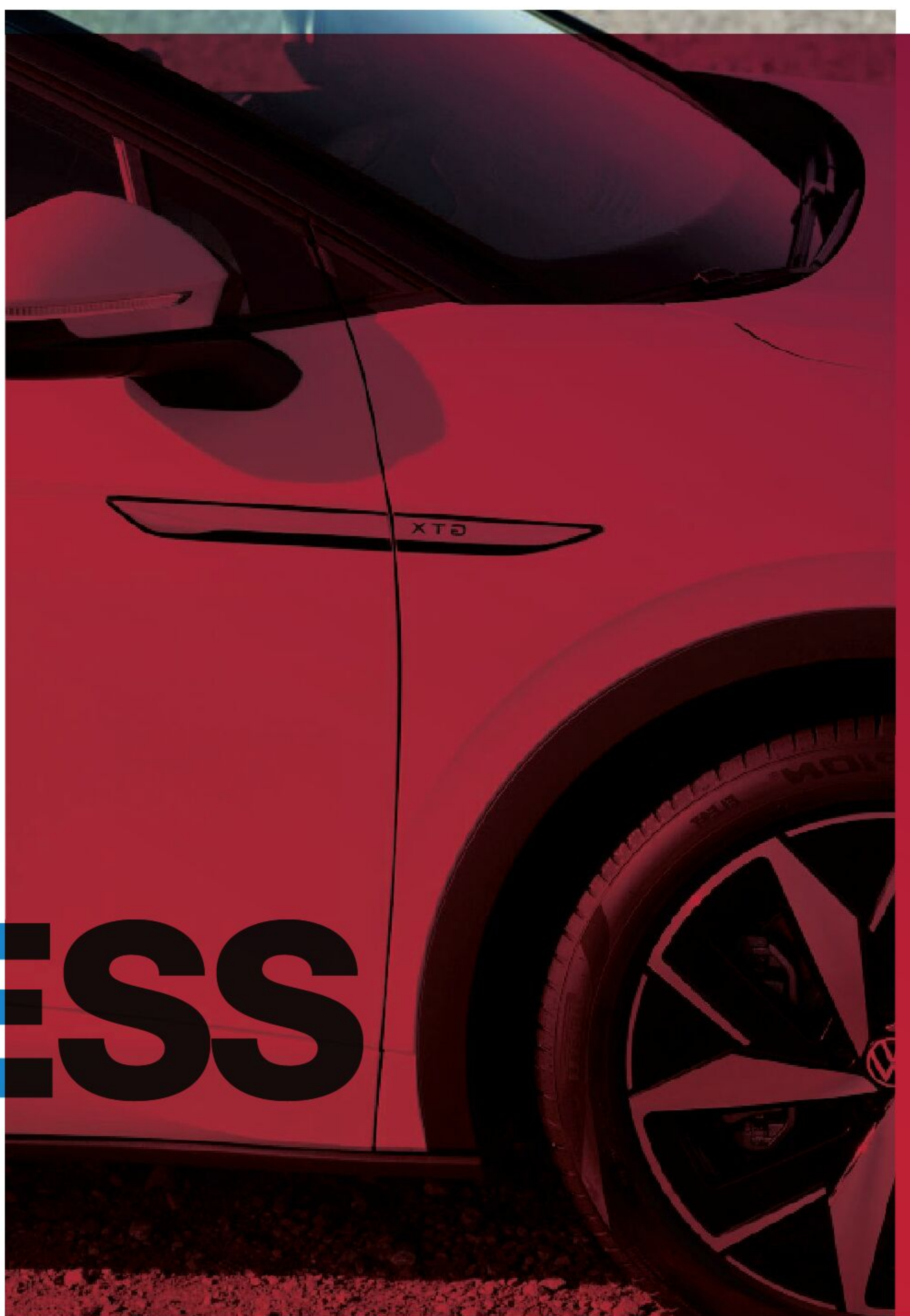


Students from St John the Baptist's College who secured £5,000 for Barnardo's Pharos. Included in the picture are trustees from the John Wilson Memorial Trust.

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Dacia Delivers



Value, innovation and desirability... the new Bigster has it all, writes James Stinson.

Prices for the new Dacia Bigster, one of the most anticipated new cars of 2025, have been revealed with entry level versions available from £24,995.

The Bigster sits above the Duster in Dacia's range and goes head-to-head with the likes of VW's Tiguan, Hyundai's Tuscon and the Kia Sportage.

Crucially, Dacia is staying true to its roots promising the Bigster will appeal to consumers who "face spiralling costs" but "want a brand new SUV without compromising on comfort, performance and space".

Bigster will be available in the UK with three trim levels. These include Expression, as well as two top-specification finishes – Journey and Extreme. Both top trims offer different equipment, but have complementary features, all for a similar price. The entire range comes in under £30,000 on-the-road.

The Bigster features the robust, angular looks that have become so popular in this class. A recycled, unpainted material called

Starkle is used for the wheel arches and side skirts adding to the rugged look and protecting the car from bumps and scrapes. In keeping with the latest Dacia models, Y-shaped details feature heavily and are part of the front and rear light clusters.

Inside the Bigster there's a focus on space and practicality. It sports a particularly large boot - some 667 litres - and the rear seats can be folded flat with a 40/20/40 split to maximise flexibility. Entry-level Expression trim features Dacia's Media Display multimedia system with four speakers and Apple CarPlay / Android Auto wireless connectivity.

The range then branches off to two higher levels: Extreme (from £26,495) and Journey (from £26,245).

These are both well-equipped with Extreme geared towards those seeking outdoor adventures and Journey aimed towards more lifestyle focused customers.

Extreme trim comes with rubber boot and floor mats as standard, plus washable upholstery so any mud or spills can easily be cleaned. Base level Expression cars come with dual-zone climate control, a 10.1-inch touchscreen and 7-inch driver display, rear parking sensors and a reversing camera.

Extreme models gain features such as satnav, hill descent control and an opening panoramic sunroof – a first for a Dacia. Meanwhile Journey cars get more creature comforts such as a central armrest, an electrically adjustable driver's seat, a wireless



phone charger and adaptive cruise control.

You'll also be able to add an array of accessories. These include an organiser for the back of the front seat, a Sleep Pack to transform the interior into a double bed and a rear armrest which can be transformed into a backpack. Additionally, there's Dacia's YouClip system with anchor points around the car enabling you to attach things like phone cradles and cupholders.

There's a choice of three engines including a new automatic 155 horsepower hybrid motor, with a towing capacity of around one tonne. This version can remain in all-electric mode up to 80% of the time in the city, says Dacia.

Alternatively, there's a 140 horsepower mild hybrid with a six-speed manual gearbox. These are both two-wheel drive options. Additionally, you can go for the four-wheel drive set up which uses the same manual 130 horsepower mild hybrid engine as the new Duster.

All-wheel drive and more powerful engines push the price closer to £30,000. Still eye-catchingly cheap compared to rivals!

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New Renault 5 Makes A Colourful Entry



The Renault 5 E-Tech electric has landed in the UK. Fresh from the French manufacturer's Douai production line that's dedicated to the manufacture of Renault EVs, the first Renault 5 to drive off the Neptune Aegli vehicle carrier was a top trim iconic five finished in vivid Pop Yellow! with a contrasting black roof.

Indeed, you'll likely remember your first sighting of a new Renault 5 on the road. Of those onboard, the vast majority were finished in Pop Yellow! and Pop Green!, with the fun-to-drive R5 living up to its promise of adding a splash of colour to the UK's roads that are traditionally most populated by monochrome-coloured cars.

Priced from £22,995, the R5 will bring French flair to the UK electric car market at a highly competitive price, offering the style, character and fun ownership experience that is widely lacking in the EV sector.

Even before touching down on UK soil the Renault 5 E-Tech electric has won a host of awards. Its list of impressive titles includes Car of the Year 2025 from the European Car of the Year jury, while its 15 awards from the UK media include the prestigious What Car? Car of the Year and Top Gear Car of the Year accolades.

There's five versions to choose from across three trim levels – evolution, techno, and iconic five. Two battery sizes are offered – an entry level 'urban' 40 kWh version with 120hp, which has an official range of 193 miles and 52kWh 'comfort' version with 150hp and a

range of up to 248 miles.

In the real world those figures will be considerably less so it may be worth splashing out a bit more for the longer range version.

Despite the retro-focussed design, the new 5 is brimming with safety and technology features. With Google services built-in and EV-optimised navigation, it can recharge to 80% in around half an hour. The My Renault app allows drivers to monitor charging, pre-set the cabin to their desired temperature or search for charging stations remotely. All models come with a heat-pump as standard, as well as vehicle-to-load (V2L) bi-directional charging functionality.

It boasts city-friendly dimensions with a body length of 3.92m and is really suited as an urban and suburban runaround, having a tight turning circle of just 10.3 metres.

The five door Renault 5 E-Tech electric also offers comfortable seating for five as well as a practical 326-litre boot, complete with dedicated storage for charging cables.

Interiors have a two-tier padded dashboard with dual horizontal screens. The central 10.1-inch multimedia display is powered by the award-winning OpenR Link system with Google built-in, featuring optimised navigation for electric driving, plus there is a colour, digital instrument panel facing the driver (7-inch on evolution, 10-inch on techno and iconic five).

All versions have automatic emergency braking (AEB), driver attention monitoring and lane-keeping assistance, while Icon Five trim adds blind-spot monitoring.

Early Personal Contract Purchase (PCP) offers see a Renault 5 E-Tech electric evolution urban range available for £249 per month over 48 months on a 5.5% APR representative PCP deal, which includes a £555 deposit contribution.

Alternatively, a 0% APR representative PCP offer across the range means customers can be driving a Renault 5 E-Tech electric urban range for £182 per month over a 24-month period with a minimum 30% deposit.

The first customer deliveries are due in spring.

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THE LAST WORD

Columnist

John Campbell

BBC NI's Economic & Business Editor

Crossing a Rubicon

The Infrastructure Minister has crossed a Rubicon by acknowledging that the current arrangements for funding Northern Ireland's water system are not working and will need to change.

Her partial solution is that some householders will, indirectly, pay towards providing wastewater connections.

It looks as though doing nothing has ceased to be an option given the obvious damage that is being caused to the local economy.

To recap: Decades of underinvestment means that much of our wastewater and sewage system is aging and needs to be upgraded.

In more than 100 areas, covering villages, towns and cities, the system is operating near or above design capacity. Therefore those places cannot accommodate any additional wastewater connections, which means no new houses or any other sort of development.

The recent surge in construction costs has made the situation worse.

NI Water's flagship investment plan for greater Belfast, Living with Water, has been drastically scaled back after costs increased by 50%.

In a recent evidence session in front of Stormont's Infrastructure committee NI Water's director of engineering, Dr Gary Curran, guided MLAs through the magnitude of the problems.

He described a scenario where Northern Ireland is "perilously close to having a permanent waste water issue" that "could end our ability to connect most new homes and enterprises." He warned that this is "a societal issue for Northern Ireland."

With the Executive parties remaining opposed to direct consumer charges that has led to the minister, Liz Kimmins, developing two proposals for charging housebuilders.

Option one is a compulsory levy - this would require a financial contribution

from all housing developers. The money would be paid into a fund and then drawn down to build new infrastructure on a prioritised needs basis across Northern Ireland.

Option two is a voluntary contribution. Developers could opt to pay to offset the costs of upgrading or replacing the infrastructure preventing new connections to a particular site.

That could potentially be an upfront payment of an agreed amount to cover the cost of the work which would be carried out by NI Water.

Alternatively the developer could submit a secured financial bond to NI Water to cover the cost of the works which would only be used in the case of the developer defaulting.

There is an acknowledgement that under both a compulsory or voluntary system additional costs could be passed through to consumers in the form of higher house prices. So indirect charging of consumers would be a reality, albeit just to those people buying a new build.

These two options are now out to consultation. The minister and her advisors will, of course, approach the exercise with an open mind.

However, a close reading of consultation documents can occasionally give us an idea which way the wind is blowing.

In this case we learn that "a compulsory levy has several advantages over voluntary contributions."

These purported advantages include a more fair and equitable system, as all developers are paying, and a more consistent and predictable source of additional funds.

Thought has also been given to how to overcome the potential paradox of such a fund: the fund cannot grow until houses are being built, but houses cannot be built without the necessary

funding to improve wastewater infrastructure.

A possible solution is seed funding or match-funding from the Executive.

Consideration has also been given to exemptions or reduced rates for certain types of development such as social housing or rural housing which is only viable with a septic tank.

There is an acknowledgement that whether a levy is compulsory or voluntary it will not provide anything like the full amount needed to address the capacity shortfalls in existing infrastructure.

The proposals have received a lukewarm response from Build Homes NI, the consortium of house builders campaigning for more wastewater investment.

They say the consultation "will not address the heart of the problem" and are also concerned that this could in effect represent water charges for first time buyers only.

They call for the Executive to provide a long-term, properly funded solution, without outlining exactly what that should be.

The Ulster University economist, Esmond Birnie, is much less coy. He says: "If we are now crossing the Rubicon in terms of considering some extra revenue raising why not be logical and go the full way?"

"Domestic water charges (even including an adequate system of social protection for low income households) would raise more revenue than developer contributions. It also could be a fairer system since the burden would be shared across all house owners."

But Dr Birnie is enough of a political realist to acknowledge that direct domestic water charging remains a political taboo and that the policy which eventually emerges from this consultation is likely to be "both rather complex and rather second best."



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